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The Witch's Head
by
H. Rider Haggard

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THE WITCH'S HEAD.

VOL. II.

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THE WITCH'S HEAD

BY

H. RIDER HAGGARD,

AUTHOR OF 'DAWN.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE WITCH'S HEAD.

CHAPTER I.

MY POOR EVA !

TWO days after the pilot-boat, flitting away from the vessel's side like some silent-flighted bird, had vanished into the night, Florence Ceswick happened to be walking past the village post-office on her way to pay a visit to Dorothy, when it struck her that the afternoon post must be in, and that she might as well ask if there were any letters for Dum's Ness. There was no second delivery at Kesterwick, and she knew that it was not always convenient to Mr. Cardus to send in. The

civil old postmaster gave her a little bundle of letters, remarking at the same time that he thought that there was one for the Cottage.

‘Is it for me, Mr. Brown?’ asked Florence.

‘No, miss; it is for Miss Eva.’

‘Oh, then I will leave it; I am going up to Dum’s Ness. No doubt Miss Eva will call.’

She knew that Eva watched the arrival of the posts very carefully. When she got outside the office she glanced at the bundle of letters in her hand, and noticed with a start that one of them, addressed to Mr. Cardus, was in Ernest’s hand-writing. It bore a Southampton post-mark. What, she wondered, could he be doing at Southampton? He should have been at Dieppe.

She walked on briskly to Dum’s Ness, and on her arrival found Dorothy sitting working in the sitting-room. After she

had greeted her she handed over the letters.

‘There is one from Ernest,’ she said.

‘Oh, I am so glad,’ answered Dorothy.

‘Who is it for?’

‘For Mr. Cardus. Oh, here he comes.’

Mr. Cardus shook hands with her, and thanked her for bringing the letters, which he turned over casually, after the fashion of a man accustomed to receive large quantities of correspondence of an uninteresting nature. Presently his manner quickened, and he opened Ernest’s letter. Florence fixed her keen eyes upon him. He read the letter, she read his face.

Mr. Cardus was accustomed to conceal his emotions, but on this occasion it was clear that they were too strong for him. Astonishment and grief pursued each other across his features as he proceeded. Finally

he put the letter down and glanced at an enclosure.

'What is it, Reginald, what is it?' asked Dorothy.

'It is,' answered Mr. Cardus solemnly, 'that Ernest is a murderer and a fugitive.'

Dorothy sank into a chair with a groan, and covered her face with her hands. Florence turned ashy pale.

'What do you mean?' she said.

'Read the letter for yourself, and see. Stop, read it aloud, and the enclosure too. I may have misunderstood.'

Florence did so in a quiet voice. It was wonderful how her power came out in contrast to the intense disturbance of the other two. The old man of the world shook like a leaf, the young girl stood firm as a rock. Yet in all probability her interest in Ernest was more intense than his.

When she had finished, Mr. Cardus spoke again.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘I was right. He is a murderer and an outcast. And I loved the boy, I loved him. Well, let him go.’

‘Oh, Ernest, Ernest,’ sobbed Dorothy.

Florence glanced from one to the other with contempt.

‘What are you talking about?’ she said at last. ‘What is there to make all this fuss about? “Murderer” indeed! then our grandfathers were often murderers. What would you have had him do? Would you have had him give up the woman’s letter to save himself? Would you have had him put up with this other man’s insults about his mother? If he had I would never have spoken to him again. Stop that groaning, Dorothy. You should be proud of him; he behaved as a gentleman should. If I had the right I should be proud of him,’ and

her breast heaved, and the proud lips curled as she said it.

Mr. Cardus listened attentively, and it was evident that her enthusiasm moved him.

‘There is something in what Florence says,’ he broke in. ‘I should not have liked the boy to show the white feather. But it is an awful business to kill one’s own first cousin, especially when one is next in the entail. Old Kershaw will be furious at losing his only son, and Ernest will never be able to come back to this country while he lives, or he will set the law on him.’

‘It is dreadful!’ said Dorothy; ‘just as he was beginning life, and going into a profession, and now to have to go and wander in that far-off country under a false name.’

‘Oh, yes, it is sad enough,’ said Mr. Cardus; ‘but what is done cannot be

undone. He is young, and will live it down, and if the worst comes to the worst, must make himself a home out there. But it is hard upon me, hard upon me,' and he went off to his office, muttering, 'hard upon me.'

When Florence started upon her homeward way, the afternoon had set in wet and chilly, and the sea was hidden in wreaths of grey mist. Altogether the scene was depressing. On arrival at the Cottage she found Eva standing the picture of melancholy by the window, and staring out at the misty sea.

'Oh, Florence, I am glad that you have come home, I really began to feel inclined to commit suicide.'

'Indeed; and may I ask why?'

'I don't know; the rain is so depressing, I suppose.'

'It does not depress me.'

‘No, nothing ever does ; you live in the land of perpetual calm.’

‘I take exercise, and keep my liver in good order. Have you been out this afternoon?’

‘No.’

‘Ah, I thought not. No wonder you feel depressed, staying indoors all day. Why don’t you go for a walk?’

‘There is nowhere to go to.’

‘Really, Eva, I don’t know what has come to you lately. Why don’t you go along the cliff, or, stop—have you been to the post-office? I called for the Dum’s Ness letters, and Mr. Brown said that there was one for you.’

Eva jumped up with remarkable animation, and passed out of the room with her peculiar light tread. The mention of that word ‘letter’ had sufficed to change the aspect of things considerably.

Florence watched her go with a dark little smile.

‘Ah,’ she said aloud as the door closed, ‘your feet will soon fall heavily enough.’

Presently Eva went out, and Florence, having thrown off her cloak, took her sister’s place at the window and waited. It was seven minutes’ walk to the post-office. She would be back in about a quarter of an hour. Watch in hand, Florence waited patiently. Seventeen minutes had elapsed when the garden gate was opened, and Eva re-entered, her face quite grey with pain, and furtively applying a handkerchief to her eyes. Florence smiled again.

‘I thought so,’ she said.

From all of which it will be seen that Florence was a very remarkable woman. She had scarcely exaggerated when she said that her heart was as deep as the sea. The

love that she bore Ernest was the strongest thing in all her strong and vigorous life ; when every other characteristic and influence crumbled away and was forgotten, it would still remain overmastering as ever. And when she discovered that her high love, the greatest and best part of her, had been made a plaything of by a thoughtless boy, who kissed girls on the same principle that a duck takes to water, because it came natural to him, the love in its mortal agonies gave birth to a hate destined to grow great as itself. But, with all a woman's injustice, it was not directed towards the same object. On Ernest, indeed, she would wreak vengeance if she could, but she still loved him as dearly as at first ; the revenge would be a mere episode in the history of her passion. But to her sister, the innocent woman who, she chose to consider, had robbed her, she gave

all that bountiful hate. Herself the more powerful character of the two, she determined upon the utter destruction of the weaker. Strong as Fate, and unrelenting as Time, she dedicated her life to that end. Everything, she said, comes to those who can wait. She forgot that the Providence above us can wait the longest of us all. In the end it is Providence that wins.

Eva came in, and Florence heard her make her way up the stairs to her room. Again she spoke to herself.

‘The poor fool will weep over him and renounce him. If she had the courage she would follow him and comfort him in his trouble, and so tie him to her for ever. Oh that I had her chance! but the chances always come to fools.’

Then she went upstairs, and listened outside Eva’s door. She was sobbing audibly. Turning the handle she walked casually in.

‘Well, Eva, did you— Why, my dear girl, *what* is the matter with you?’

Eva, who was lying sobbing on her bed, turned her head to the wall and went on sobbing.

‘What *is* the matter, Eva? If you only knew how absurd you look!’

‘No-no-thing.’

‘Nonsense, people do not make such scenes as this for nothing.’

No answer.

‘Come, my dear, as your affectionate sister, I really must ask what has happened to you.’

The tone was commanding, and half unconsciously Eva obeyed it.

‘Ernest!’ she ejaculated.

‘Well, what about Ernest? he is nothing to you, is he?’

‘No—that is, yes. Oh, it is so dreadful! It was the letter,’ and she touched a sheet

of closely-written paper that lay on the bed beside her.

‘Well, as you do not seem to be in a condition to explain yourself, perhaps you had better let me read the letter.’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Nonsense, give it me ; perhaps I may be able to help you,’ and she took the paper from her unresisting grasp, and turning her face from the light, read it deliberately through.

It was very passionate in its terms, and rather incoherent ; such a letter, in short, as a lad almost wild with love and grief would write under the circumstances.

‘So,’ said Florence, as she coolly folded it up, ‘it appears that you are engaged to him.’

No answer, unless sobs can be said to constitute one.

And it seems that you are engaged to a

man who has just committed a frightful murder, and run away from the consequences.'

Eva sat up on the bed.

'It was not a murder, it was a duel.'

'Precisely, a duel about another woman ; but the law calls it murder. If he is caught he will be hung.'

'Oh, Florence, how can you say such dreadful things ?'

'I only say what is true. Poor Eva, I do not wonder that you are distressed.'

'It is all so dreadful.'

'You love him, I suppose ?'

'Oh, yes, dearly.'

'Then you must get over it ; you must never think of him any more.'

'Never think of him ! I shall think of him all my life.'

'That is as it may be. You must never have anything more to do with him. He

has blood upon his hands, blood shed for some bad woman.'

'I cannot desert him, Florence, because he has got into trouble.'

'Over another woman.'

A peculiar expression of pain passed over Eva's face.

'How cruel you are, Florence! He is only a boy, and boys will go wrong sometimes. Anybody can make a fool of a boy.'

'And it seems that boys can make fools of some people who should know better.'

'Oh, Florence, what is to be done? You have such a clear head; tell me what I must do. I cannot give him up, I cannot indeed.'

Florence seated herself on the bed beside her sister, and put an arm round her neck and kissed her. Eva was much touched at her kindness.

‘My poor Eva,’ she said, ‘I am so sorry for you. But tell me, when did you get engaged to him—that evening you went out sailing together?’

‘Yes.’

‘He kissed you, I suppose, and all that?’

‘Yes. Oh, I was so happy!’

‘My poor Eva!’

‘I tell you I cannot give him up.’

‘Well, perhaps there will be no need for you to do so? But you must not answer that letter.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it will not do. Look at it which way you will, Ernest has just killed his own cousin in a quarrel about another woman. It is necessary that you should mark your disapproval of that in some way or other. Do not answer his letter. If in time he can wash himself clear of the reproach, and remains faithful to you, then

it will be soon enough to show that you still care for him.'

'But if I leave him like that he will fall into the hands of other women, though he loves me all the time. I know him well; his is not a nature that can stand alone.'

'Well, let him.'

'But, Florence, you forget I love him too. I cannot bear to think of it. Oh, I love him, I love him !' and she dropped her head upon her sister's shoulder and begun to sob again.

'My dear, it is just because you do love him so that you should prove him; and besides, my dear, you have your own self-respect to think of. Be guided by me, Eva; do not answer that letter; I am sure that you will regret it if you do. Let matters stand for a few months, then we can arrange a plan of action. Above all, do not let your engagement transpire to anybody.

There will be a dreadful scandal about this business, and it will be most unpleasant for you, and indeed for us all, to have our name mixed up in the matter. Hark ! there is aunt coming in. I will go and talk to her ; you can stop here and recover yourself a little. You will follow my advice, will you not, dearest ?'

'I suppose so,' answered Eva, with a heavy sigh, as she buried her face in the pillow.

Then Florence left her.

CHAPTER II.

THE LOCUM TENENS.

AND so it came to pass that Ernest's letter remained unanswered. But Mr. Cardus, Dorothy, and Jeremy all wrote. Mr. Cardus' letter was very kind and considerate. It expressed his deep grief at what had happened, and told him of the excitement that the duel had caused, and of the threatening letters which he had received from Sir Hugh Kershaw, who was half-wild with grief and fury at the loss of his son. Finally, it commended his wisdom in putting the seas between himself and the avengers of blood, and told him that he

should not want for money, as his drafts would be honoured to the extent of a thousand a year, should he require so much—Mr. Cardus was very open-handed where Ernest was concerned—also if he required any particular sum of money for any purpose, such as to buy land or start a business, he was to let him know.

Dorothy's letter was like herself, sweet and gentle, and overflowing with womanly sympathy. She bade him not to be downhearted, but to hope for a time when all this dreadful business would be forgotten, and he would be able to return in peace to England. She bade him also, shyly enough, to remember that there was only one power that could really wash away the stain of blood upon his hands. Every month, she said, she would write him a letter, whether he answered it or not. This promise she faithfully kept.

Jeremy's letter was characteristic. It is worth transcribing.

‘MY DEAR OLD FELLOW,

‘Your news has knocked us all into the middle of next week. To think of your fighting a duel, and my not being there to hold the sponge! And I will tell you what it is, old chap; some of these people round here, like that old de Talor, call it murder, but that is gammon, and don't you trouble your head about it. It was he who got up the row, not you, and he tried to shoot you into the bargain. I am awfully glad that you kept your nerve and plugged him; it would have been better if you could have nailed him through the right shoulder, which would not have killed him; but at the best of times you were never good enough with a pistol for that. Don't you remember when we used to shoot with the old pistols at the man I cut out on the cliff, you were always just as likely to hit him on the head or in the stomach as

through the heart? It is a sad pity that you did not practise a little more, but it is no use crying over spilt milk—and after all the shot seems to have been a very creditable one. So you are going on a shooting expedition up in Secocoeni's country. That is what I call glorious. To think of a rhinoceros makes my mouth water; I would give one of my fingers to shoot one. Life here is simply wretched now that you have gone—Mr. Cardus as glum as Tithenburgh Abbey on a cloudy day, and Doll always looking as though she had been crying, or were going to cry. Old Grandfather Atterleigh is quite lively compared to those two. As for the office, I hate it, everlastingly copying deeds which I don't in the slightest understand, and adding up figures in which I make mistakes. Your respected uncle told me the other day, in his politest way, that he considered I sailed as near being a complete fool as any man he ever knew. I answered that I quite agreed with him.

'I met that young fellow Smithers the

other day, the one who gave Eva Ceswick that little brute of a dog. He said something disagreeable about wondering if they would hang you. I told him that I didn't know if they would or not, but unless he dropped his infernal sneer I was very sure that I would break his neck. He concluded to move on. By the way, I met Eva Ceswick herself, yesterday. She looked pale, and asked if we had heard anything of you. She said that she had got a letter from you. Florence came up here, and spoke up well for you ; she said that she was proud of you, or would be if she had a right to. I never liked her before, but now I think that she is a brick. Good-bye, old chap ; I never wrote such a long letter before. You don't know how I miss you, life don't seem worth having. Yesterday was the first ; I went out and killed twenty brace to my own gun—fired forty-six cartridges. Not bad, eh ! And yet somehow I didn't seem to care a twopenny curse about the whole thing, though if you had been there you would have duffed them awfully. I feel

sure you would have set my teeth on edge with letting them off—the birds I mean. Mind you write to me often. Good-bye, old fellow, God bless you.

‘Your affectionate friend,

‘JEREMY JONES.’

‘P.S. In shooting big game, a fellow told me that the top of the flank raking forward is a very deadly shot, as it either breaks the back or passes through the kidneys to the lungs or heart. I should have thought that the shot was very apt to waste itself in the flesh of the flank. Please try it and take notes of the results.’

About a fortnight after these letters, addressed Ernest Beyton, Esq., Post Office, Maritzburg, Natal, had been despatched, Kesterwick and its neighbourhood was thrown into a state of mild excitement by the announcement that Mr. Halford, the clergyman, whose health had of late been none

of the best, purposed taking a year's rest, and that the Bishop had consented to the duties of his parish being carried on by a locum tenens named the Reverend James Plowden. Mr. Halford was much liked and respected, and the intelligence was received with general regret, which was, however, tempered with curiosity as to the new-comer. Thus, when it became known that Mr. Plowden was to preach in the parish church at the evening service on the third Sunday in September, all Kesterwick was seized with profound religious fervour and went to hear him.

The parish church at Kesterwick was unusually large and beautiful, being a relic of an age when, whatever men's lives may have been, they spared neither their money nor their thought in rearing up fitting habitations to the Divinity whom they regarded, perhaps with more of superstitious

awe than true religious feeling. Standing as it did somewhat back from the sea, it alone had escaped the shock of the devouring waves, and remained till this day a monument of architectural triumph. Its tall tower, pointing like a great finger up to heaven, looked very solemn on that quiet September evening as the crowd of churchgoers passed beneath its shadow into the old door-way, through which most of them had been carried to their christening, and would in due time be carried to their burial. At least so thought Eva and Dorothy as they stood for a moment by the monument to 'five unknown sailors,' washed ashore after a great gale, and buried in a common grave. How many suffering, erring human beings had stood upon the same spot and thought the same thoughts? How many more now sleeping in the womb of time would stand there and think them, when these two had

suffered and erred their full and been long forgotten ?

They formed a strange contrast, those two sweet women, as they passed together into the sacred stillness of the church—the one stately, dark, and splendid, with an unrestful trouble in her eyes ; the other almost insignificant in figure, but pure and patient of face, and with steady blue eyes which never wavered. Did they guess, those two, as they walked thus together, how closely their destinies were linked ? Did they know that each at heart was striving for the same prize, a poor one indeed, but still all the world to them. Perhaps they did, very vaguely, and it was the pressure of their common trouble that drew them closer together in those days. But if they did they never spoke of it ; and as for little Dorothy, she never dreamed of winning. She was content to be allowed to toil along in the painful race.

When they reached the pew that the Ceswicks habitually occupied, they found Miss Ceswick and Florence already there. Jeremy had refused to come ; he had a most unreasonable antipathy to parsons. Mr. Halford he liked, but of this new man he would have none. The general curiosity to see him was to Jeremy inexplicable ; his opinion being that he should soon see a great deal more of him than he liked. 'Just like a pack of girls running after a new doll,' he growled ; 'well, there is one thing, you will soon be tired of hearing him squeak.'

As the service went on, the aisles of the great church grew dim except where the setting sun shot a crimson shaft through the west window, which wandered from spot to spot and face to face, and made them glorious. When it came to the hymn before the sermon Eva could scarcely see to read,

and with the exception of the crimson pencil of sunlight that came through the head of the Virgin Mary, and wavered restlessly about, and the strong glow of the lights upon the pulpit, the church was almost dark.

When the new clergyman, Mr. Plowden, ascended the steps of the ancient pulpit and gave out his text; Eva looked at him in common with the rest of the congregation. Mr. Plowden was a large man of a somewhat lumbering make. His head, too, was large, and covered with masses of rather coarse-textured black hair. The forehead was prominent, and gave signs of intellectual power; the eyebrows thick and strongly marked, and in curious contrast to the cold, light-grey eyes that played unceasingly beneath them. All the lower part of the face, which, to judge from the purple hue of the skin, nature had intended should be

plentifully clothed with hair, was clean shaven, and revealed a large jaw, square chin, and pair of thick lips. Altogether Mr. Plowden was considered a fine man, and his face was generally spoken of as 'striking.' Perhaps the most curious thing about it, however, was a species of varicose vein on the forehead, which was generally quite unnoticeable, but whenever he was excited or nervous stood out above the level of the skin in the form of a perfect cross. It was thus visible when Eva looked at him, and it struck her as being an unpleasant mark to have on one's forehead. She turned her eyes away—the man did not please her fastidious taste—and listened for his voice. Presently it came; it was powerful and even musical, but coarse.

'He is not a gentleman,' thought Eva to herself, and then dismissing him and his sermon too from her mind, she leaned back

against the poppy-head at the end of the pew, half-closed her eyes, and let her thoughts wander in the way that thoughts have the power to do in church. Far across the sea they flew, to where a great vessel labouring in a heavy gale was ploughing her sturdy way along—to where a young man stood clinging to the iron stanchions, and gazed out into the darkness with sorrow in his eyes.

Wonderfully soft and tender grew her beautiful face as the vision passed before her soul; the ripe lips quivered, and there was a world of love in the half-opened eyes. And just then the wandering patch of glory perceiving her, settled on her like a butterfly upon a flower, and for a while wandered no longer.

Suddenly she became aware of a momentary pause in the even flow of the clergyman's eloquence, and waking from her

reverie glanced up at the spot of light surrounding him, and as she did so it struck her that she herself was illuminated with a more beautiful light—that he and she alone were distinguishable out of all the people beneath that roof.

The same thought had evidently struck Mr. Plowden, for he was gazing intently at her.

Instinctively she drew back into the shadow, and Mr. Plowden went on with his sermon. But he had driven away poor Eva's vision ; there only remained of it the sad reproachful look of those dark eyes.

Outside the church Dorothy found Jeremy waiting to escort her home. They all went together as far as the Cottage. When they got clear of the crowd, Florence spoke :

‘ What a good-looking man Mr. Plowden is, and how well he preached ! ’

‘I did not like him much,’ said Dorothy.

‘What do you think of him, Eva?’ asked Florence.

‘I! Oh I do not know. I do not think he is a gentleman.’

‘I am sure that he is not,’ put in Jeremy.
‘I saw him by the Post-Office this afternoon. He is a cad.’

‘Rather a sweeping remark, that, is it not, Mr. Jones?’ said Florence.

‘I don’t know if it is sweeping or not,’ answered Jeremy sententiously, ‘but I am sure that it is true.’

Then they said good night, and went their separate ways.

CHAPTER III.

EVA TAKES A DISTRICT.

THE Reverend James Plowden was born of rich but honest parents in the sugar-broking way. He was one of a large family, who were objects of anxious thought to Mr. and Mrs. Plowden. These worthy people, aware of the disadvantages under which they laboured in the matter of education, determined that neither trouble nor money should be spared to make their children 'genteel.' And so it came to pass that the 'mansion' near Bloomsbury was overrun with the most expensive nurses, milliners, governesses, and tutors, all straining every nerve to secure the perfect gentility of the young

Plowdens. The result was highly ornamental, but perhaps scarcely equivalent to the vast expense incurred. The Plowden youth of both sexes may be said to have been painted, and varnished, and gilded into an admirable imitation of gentle-folks, but if the lacquer-work would stand the buffetings of the world's weather was another question, and one which, except in so far as it has to do with a single member of the family, does not concern us.

Master James Plowden came about half-way down the family list, but he might just as well have stood at the head of it, for he ruled his brothers and sisters, old and young, with a heavy rod. He was the strong one of the family, strong both in mind and body, and he had a hand of iron.

For his misdeeds were his brothers thrashed, preferring to take those ills they knew of from the hands of the thrasher,

rather than endure the unimagined horrors brother James would make ready for them should they venture to protest.

Thus it was that he came to be considered par excellence the good boy of the family, as he was certainly the clever one, and bore every sort of blushing honour thick upon him.

It was to an occurrence in his boyhood that Mr. Plowden owed his parents' determination to send him into the Church. His future career had always been a matter of much speculation to them, for they belonged to that class of people who love to arrange their infants' destinies when the infants themselves are still in the cradle, and argue their fitness for certain lines of life from remarks which they make at three years old.

Now James's mamma had a very favourite parrot, with a red tail, and out of this tail

it was James's delight to pull the feathers, having discovered that so doing gave the parrot a lively twinge of pain. The onus of the feather-pulling was then, if discovered, shouldered on to a chosen brother, who was promptly thrashed.

But on one occasion things went wrong with Master James. The parrot was climbing up the outside of his cage, presenting the remainder of his tail to the hand of the spoiler in a way that was irresistibly seductive. But aware of the fact that his enemy was in the neighbourhood, he kept a careful look-out from the corner of his eye, and the moment that he saw James's stealthy hand draw near his tail, made a sudden dart at it, and actually succeeded in making his powerful beak meet through its forefinger. James shrieked with pain and fury, and shaking the bird on to the floor stunned it with a book. But he was not satisfied with

this revenge, for as soon as he saw that it could no longer bite, he seized it and twisted its neck.

‘There, you devil!’ he said, throwing the creature into the cage. ‘Hullo, something has burst in my forehead!’

‘Oh, James, what have you done!’ said his little brother Montague, well knowing that he had a lively personal interest in James’s misdoings.

‘Nonsense! what have you done? Now remember, Montague, *you* killed the parrot.’

Just then Mr. and Mrs. Plowden came in from a drive, and a very lively scene ensued, into which we need not enter. Suffice it to say, that all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, James was acquitted on the ground of general good character, and Montague, howling and protesting his innocence, was led off to execution. Justly fearful lest something further

should transpire, James was hurriedly leaving the room, when his mother called him back.

‘Why, what is that on your forehead?’

‘Don’t know,’ answered James; ‘something went snap there just now.’

‘Well I never! Just look at the boy, John, he has got a cross upon his forehead.’

Mr. Plowden papa examined the phenomenon very carefully, and then, solemnly removing his spectacles, remarked with much deliberation :

‘Elizabeth, that settles the point.’

‘What point, John?’

‘What point! Why the point of the boy’s profession. It is, as you remark, a cross upon his forehead. Good!—he shall go into the Church. Now I must decline to be argued with, Elizabeth. The matter is settled.’

And so in due course James Plowden,

Esq., went to Cambridge, and became the Reverend James Plowden.

Shortly after the Reverend James had started in life as a curate he found it convenient—having first succeeded in beguiling his parents into settling on himself a portion just twice as large as that to which he was entitled—to cut off his connection with a family he considered vulgar, and a drag upon his professional success. But somehow, with all his gifts, and undoubtedly he was by nature well endowed, especially as regards his mind, that was remarkable for a species of hard cleverness and persuasive power; and with all the advantages which he derived from being in receipt of an independent income, the Reverend James had not hitherto proved a conspicuous success. He had held several important curacies, and of late had acted as the locum tenens of several gentlemen who, like Mr.

Halford, had through loss of health or other reasons been called away from their livings for a length of time.

But from all these places the Reverend James had departed without regret, nor had there been any very universal lamentations over his going. The fact of the matter was that the Reverend James was not a popular man. He had ability in plenty, and money in plenty, and would expend both without stint if he had an end to gain. He was more or less of a good companion, too, in the ordinary sense of the word; that is, he could make himself agreeable in a rough, exaggerated kind of way to both men and women. Indeed by the former he was often spoken of carelessly as a 'good fellow;' but women, or rather ladies, following their finer instincts, disliked him intensely. He jarred upon them.

Of course it is impossible to lay down

any fixed rule about men, but there are two tokens by which they may be known. The first is by their friends ; the second by the degree of friendship and affection to which they are admitted by women. The man to whom members of the other sex attach themselves is in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred a good fellow, and women's instinct tells them so, or they would not love him. It may be urged that women often love blackguards. To this the answer is that there must be a good deal of good mixed up with the blackguardism. Show me the man whom two or three women of his own rank love with all their honest hearts, and I will trust all I have into his hands and not be a penny the poorer.

But women did not love the Reverend James Plowden, although he had for several years come to the conclusion that it was desirable that they should, or rather that

one of them should. In plain language, he had for some years past thought that he would improve his position by getting married. He was a shrewd man, and he could not disguise from himself the fact that so far he was not altogether a success. He had tried his best, but, with all his considerable advantages, he had failed. There was only one avenue to success which he had not tried, and that was marriage. Marriage with a woman of high caste, quick intellect, and beauty, might give him the tone that his social system so sadly needed. He was a man in a good position, he had money, he had intelligence of a robust if of a coarse order, he had fairly good looks, and he was only thirty-five ; why should he not marry blood, brains, and beauty, and shine with a reflected splendour ?

Such were the thoughts which were simmering in the astute brain of the

Reverend James Plowden when he first set eyes upon Eva Ceswick in the old church at Kesterwick.

Within a week or so of his arrival, Mr. Plowden, in his character of spiritual adviser to the motley Kesterwick flock, paid a ceremonious call on the Miss Ceswicks. They were all at home.

Miss Ceswick and Florence welcomed him graciously ; Eva politely, but with an air which said plainly that he interested her not at all. Yet it was to Eva that he chiefly directed himself. He took this opportunity to inform them all, especially Eva, that he felt the responsibilities of his position as locum tenens to weigh heavily upon him. He appealed to them all, especially Eva, to help him to bear his load. He was going to institute a new system of district visiting. Would they all, especially Eva, assist him ? If they would, the good

work was already half done. There was so much for young ladies to do. He could assure them, from his personal experience, that one visit from a young lady, however useless she might be in a general way, which his instinct assured him these particular young ladies before him were not, had more influence with a distressed and godless family than six from well-meaning but unsympathetic clergymen like himself. Might he rely on their help?

‘I am afraid that I am too old for that sort of thing, Mr. Plowden,’ answered Miss Ceswick. ‘You must see what you can do with my nieces.’

‘I am sure that I shall be delighted to help,’ said Florence, ‘if Eva will bear me company. I always feel a shyness about intruding myself into cottages unsupported.’

‘Your shyness is not surprising, Miss Ceswick. I suffered from it myself for many

years, but at last I have, I am thankful to say, got the better of it. But I am sure that we shall not appeal to your sister in vain.'

'I shall be glad to help if you think that I can do any good,' put in Eva thus directly appealed to; 'but I must tell you I have no great faith in myself.'

'Do the work, Miss Ceswick, and the faith will come; sow the seed and the tree will spring up, and bear fruit too in due season.'

There was no reply, so he continued: 'Then I have your permission to put you down for a district.'

'Oh yes, Mr. Plowden,' answered Florence. 'Will you take some more tea?'

Mr. Plowden would take no more tea, but went on his way to finish the day's work he had mapped out for himself—for he worked hard and according to a strict

rule—reflecting that Eva Ceswick was the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

‘I think that we must congratulate you on a conquest, Eva,’ said Miss Ceswick cheerfully as the front-door closed. ‘Mr. Plowden never took his eyes off you, and really, my dear, I do not wonder at it, you look charming.’

Eva flushed up angrily.

‘Nonsense, aunt,’ she said, and left the room.

‘Really,’ said Miss Ceswick, ‘I don’t know what has come to Eva lately, she is so very strange.’

‘I expect that you touched her on a sore point. I rather fancy that she has taken a liking to Mr. Plowden,’ said Florence drily.

‘Oh indeed,’ answered the old lady, nodding her head wisely.

In due course a district was assigned to

the two Miss Ceswicks, and for her part Eva was glad of the occupation. It brought her a good deal into contact with Mr. Plowden, which was not altogether pleasant to her, for she cherished a vague dislike of the clergyman, and did not admire his shifty eyes. But as she got to know him better, she could find nothing to justify her dislike. He was not, it is true, quite a gentleman, but that was his misfortune. His manner to herself was subdued and almost deferential; he never obtruded himself upon her society, though somehow he was in it almost daily. Indeed, he even succeeded in raising her to some enthusiasm about her work, a quality in which poor Eva had of late been sadly lacking. She thought him a very good clergyman, with his heart in his duty. But she disliked him all the same.

Eva never answered Ernest's letter. Once

she began an answer, but bethought her of Florence's sage advice, and changed her mind. 'He will write again,' she said to herself. She did not know Ernest; his was not a nature to humble himself before a woman. Could she have seen her lover hanging about the steps of the Maritzburg Post-Office when the English mail was being delivered, in order to go back to the window when the people had dispersed, and ask the tired clerk if he was 'sure' that there were no more letters for Ernest Beyton, and get severely snubbed for his pains, perhaps her heart would have relented. And yet it was a performance which poor Ernest went through once a week out there in Natal.

One mail day Mr. Alston went with him.

'Well, Ernest, has it come?' he asked, as he came down the steps, a letter from Dorothy in his hand.

‘No, Alston, and never will. She has thrown me over.’

Mr. Alston took his arm, and walked away with him across the market-square.

‘Look here, my lad,’ he said ; ‘the woman who deserts a man in trouble, or as soon as his back is turned, is worthless. It is a sharp lesson to learn, but as most men have cause to know, the world is full of sharp lessons and worthless women. You know that she got your letter.’

‘Yes, she told my friend so.’

‘Then I tell you that your Eva, or whatever her name is, is more worthless than most of them. She has been tried and found wanting. Look,’ he went on, pointing to a shapely Kafir girl passing with a pot of native beer upon her head, ‘you had better take that Intombi to wife than such a woman as this Eva. She at any rate would stand by you in trouble, and if you fell

would stop to be killed over your dead body. Come, be a man, and have done with her.'

'Ay, by heaven, I will,' answered Ernest.

'That's right. And now, look here, the waggons will be at Lydenburg in a week. Let us take the post-cart to-morrow and go up. Then we can have a month's wilderbeeste and koodoo shooting until it is safe to go into the fever country. Once you get among the big game, you won't think any more about that woman. Women are all very well in their way, but if it comes to choosing between them and big game shooting, give me the big game.

CHAPTER IV.

JEREMY'S IDEA OF A SHAKING.

TWO months or so after Ernest's flight there came a letter from him to Mr. Cardus in answer to the one sent by his uncle. He thanked his uncle warmly for his kindness, and more especially for not joining in the hue and cry against him. As regards money, he hoped to be able to make a living for himself, but if he wanted any he would draw. The letter, which was short, ended thus :

‘Thank Doll and Jeremy for their letters. I would answer them, but I am too down on my luck to write much ; writing stirs up so many painful memories, and makes me think of all the dear folks at home more

than is good for me. The fact is, my dear uncle, what between one thing and another I never was so miserable in my life, and as for loneliness, I never knew what it meant before. Sometimes I wish that my cousin had hit me instead of my hitting him, and that I was dead and buried, clean out of the way. Alston, who was my second in that unhappy affair, and with whom I am going up country shooting, has been most kind to me, and has introduced me to a good many people here. They are very hospitable; everybody is hospitable in a colony; but somehow a hundred new faces cannot make up for one old one, and I should think old Atterleigh a cheerful companion beside the best of them. What is more, I feel myself an impostor intruding myself on them under an assumed name. Good-bye, my dear uncle. It would be difficult for me to explain how grateful I am for your goodness to me. Love to dear Doll and Jeremy.

‘Ever your affectionate nephew,
‘E. K.’

All the party at Dum's Ness were much touched by this letter, more especially Dorothy, who could not bear to think of Ernest all alone out there in that strange far-off land. Her tender little heart grew all alive with love and sorrow as she lay awake at night and thought of him travelling over the great African plains. She got all the books that were to be had about South Africa, and read them, so that she might be the better able to follow his life in her thoughts. One day when Florence came to see her, she read her part of Ernest's letter, and when she had finished was astonished to see a tear in her visitor's keen eyes. She liked Florence the better for that tear. Could she have seen the conflict that was raging in the fierce heart of the woman before her, she would have started from her as though she had been a poisonous snake. The letter touched

Florence—touched her to the quick. The tale of Ernest's loneliness almost overcame her resolution, for she alone knew why he was so utterly lonely, and what it was that crushed him. Had Ernest alone been concerned, it is probable that she would then and there have thrown up her cruel game ; but he was not alone concerned. There was her sister who had robbed her of her lover—her sister whose loveliness was a standing affront to her, as her sweetness was a standing reproach. She was sorry for Ernest, and would have been glad to make him happier, but as that could only be done by foregoing her revenge upon her sister, Ernest must continue to suffer. And after all why should he not suffer ? she argued. Did not she suffer ?

When Florence got home she told Eva about the letter from her lover, but she said nothing of his evident distress. He was

making friends, he expected great pleasure from his shooting—altogether he was getting on well.

Eva listened, hardened her heart, and went out district visiting with Mr. Plowden.

Time went on, and no letters came from Ernest. One month, two months, six months passed, and there was no intelligence of him. Dorothy grew very anxious and so did Mr. Cardus, but they did not speak of the matter much, except to remark that the reason no doubt was that he was away on his shooting excursion.

Jeremy, also, in his slow way grew intensely preoccupied with the fact that they never heard from Ernest now, and that life was consequently a blank. He sat upon the stool in his uncle's outer office, and made pretence to copy deeds and drafts, but in reality occupied his time in assiduously polishing his nails and thinking.

As for the deeds and drafts, he gave them to his grandfather to copy.

‘It kept the old gentleman employed,’ he would explain to Dorothy, ‘and from indulging in bad thoughts about the devil.’

But it was one night out duck-shooting that his great inspiration came. It was a bitter night, a night on which no sane creature except Jeremy would ever have dreamt of going to shoot ducks or anything else. The marshes were partially frozen, and a fierce east wind was blowing across them, but utterly regardless of the cold, there sat Jeremy under the lee of a dyke-bank, listening for the sound of the ducks’ wings as they passed to their feeding-grounds, and occasionally getting a shot at them as they crossed the moon above him. There were not many ducks, and the solitude and silence were inductive of contemplation. Ernest did not write. Was

he dead? Not probable, or they would have heard of it. Where was he then? Impossible to say, impossible to discover. Was it impossible? '*Swish, swish, bang!*' and down came a mallard at his feet. A quick shot, that! Yes, it was impossible; they had no means of inquiry here. The inquiry, if any, must be made there, on the other side of the water: but who was to make it? Ah! an idea struck him. Why should not he, Jeremy, make that inquiry? Why should he not go to South Africa and look for Ernest? A flight of duck passed over his head unheeded. What did he care for duck? He had solved the problem which had been troubling him all these months. He would go to South Africa and look for Ernest. If Mr. Cardus would not give him the money he would work his way out. Anyhow he would go. He could bear the suspense no longer.

Jeremy rose in the new-found strength of his purpose, and gathering up the slain—there were only three—whistled to his retriever, and made his way back to Dum's Ness.

He found Mr. Cardus and Dorothy by the fire in the sitting-room. Hard-riding Atterleigh was there too, in his place in the ingle-nook, a riding-whip in his ink-stained hand, with which he was tapping his top boot. They turned as he entered, except his grandfather, who did not hear him.

'What sport have you had, Jeremy?' asked his sister with a sad little smile. Her face had grown very sad of late.

'Three ducks,' he answered shortly, advancing his powerful form out of the shadows into the fire-light. 'I came home just as they were beginning to fly.'

'You found it cold, I suppose,' said Mr.

Cardus absently. They had been talking of Ernest, and he was still thinking of him.

‘No, I did not think of the cold. I came home because I had an idea.’

Both his hearers looked up surprised. Ideas were not very common to Jeremy, or if they were he kept them to himself.

‘Well, Jeremy,’ said Dorothy inquiringly.

‘Well, it is this. I cannot stand this about Ernest any longer, and I am going to look for him. If you won’t give me the money,’ he went on, addressing Mr. Cardus almost fiercely, ‘I will work my way out. It is no credit to me,’ he added; ‘I lead a dog’s life whilst I don’t know where he is.’

Dorothy flushed a pale pink with pleasure. Rising, she went up to her great strong brother, and standing on tip-toe managed to kiss him on the chin.

‘That is like you, Jeremy dear,’ she said softly.

Mr. Cardus looked up too, and after his fashion let his eyes wander round Jeremy before he spoke.

‘You shall have as much money as you like, Jeremy,’ he said presently, ‘and if you bring Ernest back safe, I will leave you twenty thousand pounds’—and he struck his hand down upon his knee, an evidence of excitement which it was unusual for him to display.

‘I don’t want your twenty thousand pounds, I want Ernest,’ answered the young man gruffly.

‘No. I know you don’t, my lad; I know you don’t. But find him and keep him safe, and you shall have it. Money is not to be sneezed at let me tell you. I say keep him, for I forgot you cannot bring him back till this accursed business has blown over. When will you go?’

‘By the next mail, of course. They leave

every Friday ; I will not waste a day. To-day is Saturday, I will sail next Friday.'

'That is right, you shall go at once. I will give you a cheque for £500 to-morrow, and mind, Jeremy, you are not to spare money. If he has gone to the Zambesi, you must follow him. Never think of the money, I will think of that.'

Jeremy soon made his preparations. They consisted chiefly of rifles. He was to leave Dum's Ness early on the Thursday. On the Wednesday afternoon it occurred to him that he might as well tell Eva Ceswick that he was going in search of Ernest, and ask if she had any message. Jeremy was the only person, or thought that he was the only person, in the secret of Ernest's affection for Eva. Ernest had asked him to keep it secret, and he had kept it as secret as the dead, never breathing a word of it, even to his sister.

It was about five o'clock on a windy March afternoon when he set out for the Cottage. On the edge of the hamlet of Kesterwick, some three hundred yards from the cliff, stood two or three little hovels, turning their naked faces to the full fury of the sea blast. He was drawing near to these when he came to a stile which gave passage over a sod wall that ran to the edge of the cliff, marking the limits of the village common. As he approached the stile the wind brought him the sound of voices—a man's and a woman's, engaged apparently in angry dispute on the further side of the wall. Instead of getting over the stile he stepped to the right and looked over the wall, and saw the new clergyman, Mr. Plowden, standing with his back towards him, and, apparently very much against her will, holding Eva Ceswick by the hand. Jeremy was too far off to

overhear his words, but from his voice it was clear that Plowden was talking in an excited, masterful tone. Just then Eva turned her head a little, and he did hear what she said, her voice being so much clearer.

‘No, Mr. Plowden, no. Let go my hand. Ah, why will you not take an answer?’

Just at that moment she succeeded in wrenching her imprisoned hand from his strong grasp, and without waiting for any more words, set off towards Kesterwick almost at a run.

Jeremy was a man of slow mind, though when once his mind was made up it was of a singularly determined nature. At first he did not quite take in the full significance of the scene, but when he did a great red flush spread over his honest face, and the big grey eyes sparkled dangerously. Presently Mr. Plowden turned and saw him.

Jeremy noticed that the 'sign of the cross' was remarkably visible on his forehead, and that his face wore an expression by no means pleasant to behold—anything but Christian in short.

'Hullo!' he said to Jeremy, 'what are you doing there?'

Before answering, Jeremy put his hand on the top of the sod wall, and vaulting over walked straight up to the clergyman.

'I was watching you,' he said, looking him straight in the eyes.

'Indeed!—an honourable employment; eavesdropping I think it is generally called.'

Whatever had passed between Mr. Plowden and Eva Ceswick, it had clearly not improved the former's temper.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean what I say.'

'Well, Mr. Plowden, I may as well tell

you what I mean ; I am not good at talking, but I know that I shall be able to make you understand. I saw you just now assaulting Miss Ceswick.'

'It is a lie.'

'That is not a gentlemanlike word, Mr. Plowden, but as you are not a gentleman I will overlook it.' Jeremy, after the dangerous fashion of the Anglo-Saxon race, always got wonderfully cool as a row thickened. 'I repeat that I saw you holding her notwithstanding her struggles to get away.'

'And what is that to you, confound you,' said Mr. Plowden, shaking with fury, and raising a thick stick he held in his hand in a suggestive manner.

'Don't lose your temper and you shall hear. Miss Eva Ceswick is engaged to my friend Ernest Kershaw or something very like it, and as he is not here to look after

his own interests, I must look after them for him.'

'Ah, yes,' answered Mr. Plowden with a ghastly smile, 'I have heard of that. The murderer you mean.'

'I recommend you, Mr. Plowden, in your own interest, to be a little more careful in your terms.'

'And supposing that there has been something between your—your friend.'

'Much better term, Mr. Plowden.'

'And, Miss Eva Ceswick, what, I should like to know, is there to prevent her having changed her mind?'

Jeremy laughed aloud, it must be admitted rather insolently, and in a way calculated to irritate people of meeker mind than Mr. Plowden.

'To any one, Mr. Plowden, who has the privilege of your acquaintance, and who also knows Ernest Kershaw, your question

would seem absurd. You see, there are some people between whom there can be no comparison. It is not possible that after caring for Ernest any woman could care for you ;' and Jeremy laughed again.

Mr. Plowden's thick lips turned quite pale, the veinous cross upon his forehead throbbed till Jeremy thought that it would burst, and his eyes shone with the concentrated light of hate. His vanity was his weakest point. He controlled himself with an effort, however, though if there had been any deadly weapon at hand it might have gone hard with Jeremy.

'Perhaps you will explain the meaning of your interference and your insolence, and let me go on.'

'Oh, with pleasure,' answered Jeremy, with refreshing cheerfulness. 'It is just this, if I catch you at any such tricks

again, you shall suffer for it. One can't thrash a clergyman, and one can't fight him because he won't fight; but look here, one can *shake* him, for that leaves no marks, and if you go on with these games, so sure as my name is Jeremy Jones, I will shake your teeth down your throat. Good night;' and Jeremy turned to go.

It is not wise to turn one's back upon an infuriated animal, and at that moment Mr. Plowden was nothing more. Even as he turned Jeremy remembered this and gave himself a slue to one side. It was fortunate for him that he did so, for at that moment Mr. Plowden's heavy blackthorn stick, directed downwards with all the strength of Mr. Plowden's powerful arm, passed within a few inches of his head, out of which, had he not turned, it would have probably knocked the brains. As it was it struck the ground with such force

that the jar sent it flying out of its owner's hand.

'Ah, you would,' was Jeremy's reflection as he sprang at his assailant.

Now Mr. Plowden was a very powerful man, but he was no match for Jeremy, who in after days came to be known as the strongest man in the East of England, and so he was destined to find out. Once Jeremy got a grip of him, for his respect for the Church prevented him from trying to knock him down, he seemed to crumple up like a piece of paper in his iron grasp. Jeremy could easily have thrown him, but he would not, he had his own ends in view. So he just held him tight enough to prevent his doing him (Jeremy) any serious injury, and let him struggle frantically till he thought he was sufficiently exhausted for his purpose. Then he suddenly gave him a violent twist, got behind him, and set to

work with a will to fulfil his promise of a shaking. Oh, what a shake that was! First of all he shook him backwards and forwards for Ernest's sake, then he alternated the motion and shook him from side to side for his own sake, and finally he shook him every possible way for the sake of Eva Ceswick.

It was a wonderful sight to see the great burly clergyman, his hat off, his white tie undone, and his coat-tails waving like streamers, bounding and gambolling on the breezy cliffs, his head, legs, and arms jerking in every possible direction, like those of a galvanised frog, while behind him, his legs slightly apart to get a better grip of the ground, and his teeth firmly clenched, Jeremy shook away with the fixity of fate.

At last, getting exhausted, he stopped, and, holding Mr. Plowden still, gave him a drop-kick—only one. But Jeremy's leg was

very strong, and he always wore thick boots, and the result was startling. Mr. Plowden rose some inches off the ground and went on his face into a furze-bush.

‘He will hardly like to show *that* honourable wound,’ reflected Jeremy, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow with every sign of satisfaction.

Then he went and picked his fallen enemy out of the bush, where he had nearly fainted, smoothed his clothes, tied the white tie as neatly as he could, and put the wide hat on the dishevelled hair. Then he sat him down on the ground to recover himself.

‘Good night, Mr. Plowden, good night. Next time you wish to hit a man with a big stick do not wait till his back is turned. Ah, I dare say your head aches. I should advise you to go home and have a nice sleep.’

And Jeremy departed on his way, filled with a fearful joy.

When he reached the Cottage he found everything in a state of confusion. Miss Ceswick had, it appeared, been suddenly taken very seriously ill, indeed it was feared that she had got a stroke of apoplexy. He managed, however, to send up a message to Eva to say that he wished to speak to her for a minute. Presently she came down, crying.

‘Oh, my poor aunt is so dreadfully ill,’ she said. ‘We think that she is dying.’

Jeremy offered some awkward condolences, and indeed was much distressed. He liked old Miss Ceswick.

‘I am going to South Africa to-morrow, Miss Eva,’ he said.

She started violently, and blushed up to her hair.

‘Going to South Africa! What for?’

‘I am going to look for Ernest. We are afraid that something must have happened to him.’

‘Oh, don’t say that,’ she said. ‘Perhaps he has — amusements which prevent his writing.’

‘I may as well tell you that I saw something of what passed between you and Mr. Plowden.’

Again Eva blushed.

‘Mr. Plowden was very rude,’ she said.

‘So I thought ; but I think that he is sorry for it now.’

‘What do you mean ?’

‘I mean that I nearly shook his ugly head off for him.’

‘Oh, how could you ?’ Eva asked severely ; but there was no severity on her face.

Just then Florence’s voice was heard calling imperatively.

'I must go,' said Eva.

'Have you any message for Ernest if I find him?'

Eva hesitated.

'I know all about it,' said Jeremy, considerably turning his head.

'Oh, no, I have no message—that is—oh, tell him *that I love him dearly!*' and she turned and fled up-stairs.

CHAPTER V.

FLORENCE ON MARRIAGE.

MISS CESWICK'S seizure turned out to be even worse than was anticipated. Once she appeared to regain consciousness, and began to mutter something, then she sunk back into a torpor out of which she never woke again.

It was fortunate that her condition was not such as to require the services of the clergyman, for Mr. Plowden was for some days after the events described in the last chapter not in any condition to give them. Whether it was the shaking, or the well-planted kick, or the shock to his system, it is impossible to say, but he was in the

upshot constrained to keep his bed for several days. Indeed the first service that he took was on the occasion of the opening of the ancient Ceswick vault to receive the remains of the recently deceased lady. The only territorial possession which remained to the Ceswicks was their vault. Indeed, as Florence afterwards remarked to her sister, there was a certain irony in the reflection that of all their wide acres there remained only the few square feet of soil, which for centuries had covered the bones of the race.

When their aunt was dead and buried, the two girls went back to the Cottage, and were very desolate. They had both of them loved the old lady in their separate ways, more especially Florence, both because she possessed the deeper nature of the two and because she had lived the longest with her.

But the grief of youth at the departure of age is not inconsolable, and after a month

or so they had conquered the worst of their sorrow. Then it was that the question what they were to do came prominently to the fore. Such little property as their aunt had possessed was equally divided between them, and the cottage left to their joint use. This gave them enough to live on in their quiet way, but it undoubtedly left them in a very lonely and unprotected position. Such as it was, however, they, or rather Florence, for she managed all the business, decided to make the best of it. At Kesterwick they were, at any rate, known, and it was, they felt, better to stay there than to float away and become waifs and strays on the great sea of English life. So they settled to stay.

Florence had moreover her own reasons for staying. She had come to the conclusion that it would be desirable that her sister Eva should marry Mr. Plowden. Not that

she liked Mr. Plowden—her lady's instincts rose up in rebellion against the man—but if Eva did not marry him, it was probable that she would in the long run marry Ernest, and Ernest, Florence swore, she should not marry. To prevent such a marriage was the main purpose of her life. Her jealousy and hatred of her sister had become a part of herself; the gratification of her revenge was the evil star by which she shaped her course. It may seem a terrible thing that so young a woman could give the best energies of her life to such a purpose, but it was none the less the truth.

Hers was a wild, strange nature, a nature capable of violent love and violent hate; the same pendulum could swing with equal ease to each extreme. Eva had robbed her of her lover, she would rob Eva, and put the prize out of her reach too. Little she

recked of the wickedness of her design, for where in the long record of human crime is there a wickedness to surpass the deliberate separation, for no good reason, of two people who love each other with all their hearts? Surely there is none. She knew this, but she did not hesitate on that account. She was not hypocritical. She made no excuses to herself. She knew well that on every ground it was best that Eva should marry Ernest, and pursue her natural destiny, happy in his love and in her own. But she would have none of it. If once they should meet again the game would pass out of her hands, for the weakest woman grows strong of purpose when she has her lover's arm to lean on. Florence realised this, and determined that they should never set eyes on each other until an impassable barrier in the shape of Mr. Plowden had been raised between the two.

Having thus finally determined on the sacrifice, she set about whetting the knife.

One day, a month or so after Miss Ceswick was buried, Mr. Plowden called at the Cottage on some of the endless details of which district visiting was the parent. He had hardly seen Eva since that never-to-be-forgotten day, when he had learnt what Jeremy's ideas of a shaking were, for the very good reason that she had carefully kept out of his way.

So it came to pass that when, looking out of the window on the afternoon in question, she saw the crown of a clerical hat coming along the road, Eva promptly gathered up her work and commenced a hasty retreat to her bedroom.

'Where are you going to, Eva?' asked her sister.

'Upstairs—here he comes.'

'He, who is "he"?'

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‘Mr. Plowden, of course.’

‘And why should you run away because Mr. Plowden is coming?’

‘I do not like Mr. Plowden.’

‘Really, Eva, you are too bad. You know what a friendless position we are in just now, and you go and get up a dislike to one of the few men we know. It is very selfish of you, and most unreasonable.’

At that moment the front door bell rung, and Eva fled.

Mr. Plowden on entering looked round the room with a somewhat disappointed air.

‘If you are looking for my sister,’ said Florence, ‘she is not very well.’

‘Indeed I am afraid that her health is not good ; she is so often indisposed.’

Florence smiled, and they dropped into the district visiting. Presently, however, Florence dropped out again.

‘By the way, Mr. Plowden, I want to tell you of something I heard the other day, and which concerns you. Indeed I think that it is only right that I should do so. I heard that you were seen talking to my sister, not very far from the Titheburgh Abbey cottages, and that she—she ran away from you. Then Mr. Jones jumped over the wall, and also began to talk with you. Presently he also turned, and, so said my informant, you struck at him with a heavy stick, but missed him. Thereupon a tussle ensued, and you got the worst of it.’

‘He irritated me beyond all endurance,’ broke in Mr. Plowden excitedly.

‘Oh, then the story is true?’

Mr. Plowden saw that he had made a fatal mistake, but it was too late to deny it.

‘To a certain extent,’ he said sulkily.
‘That young ruffian told me that I was not a gentleman.’

‘Really! Of course that was unpleasant. But how glad you must feel that you missed him, especially as his back was turned! It would have looked so bad for a clergyman to be had up for assault, or worse, wouldn’t it?’

Mr. Plowden turned pale and bit his lip. He began to feel that he was in the power of this quiet, dignified young woman, and the feeling was not pleasant.

‘And it would not look very well if the story got round here, would it? I mean even if it was not known that you hit at him with the stick when he was not looking, because, you see, it would sound so absurd. The idea of a clergyman more than six feet high being *shaken* like a naughty child! I suppose that Mr. Jones is very strong.’

Mr. Plowden winced beneath her mockery, and rising, seized his hat, but she motioned him back to his chair.

‘Don’t go yet,’ she said. ‘I wanted to tell you that you ought to be much obliged to me for thinking of all this for you. I thought that it would be painful to you to have the story all over the country-side, so I nipped it in the bud.’

Mr. Plowden groaned in spirit. If these were the results of a story nipped in the bud, what would its uninjured bloom be like?

‘Who told you?’ he asked brusquely. ‘Jones went away.’

‘Yes. How glad you must be, by the way, that he *is* gone! But it was not Mr. Jones, it was a person who oversaw the difference of opinion. No, never mind who it was; I have found means to silence that person.’

Little did Mr. Plowden guess that during the whole course of his love scene, and the subsequent affair with Jeremy, there had

leant gracefully in an angle of the sod wall, not twenty yards away, a figure uncommonly resembling that of an ancient mariner in an attitude of the most intense and solemn contemplation ; but so it was.

‘ I am grateful to you, Miss Ceswick.’

‘ Thank you, Mr. Plowden, it is refreshing to meet with true gratitude, it is a scarce flower in this world, but really I don’t deserve any. The observer who oversaw the painful scene between you and Mr. Jones also oversaw a scene preceding it, that, so far as I can gather, seems to have been hardly less painful in its way.’

Mr. Plowden coloured, but said nothing.

‘ Now you see, Mr. Plowden, I am left in a rather peculiar position as regards my sister ; she is younger than I am, and has always been accustomed to look up to me, so, as you will easily understand, I feel my

responsibilities to weigh upon me. Consequently I feel bound to ask you what I am to understand from the report of my informant.'

'Simply this, Miss Ceswick ; I proposed to your sister and she refused me.'

'Indeed ! you were unfortunate that afternoon.'

'Miss Ceswick,' went on Mr. Plowden, after a pause, 'if I could find means to induce your sister to change her verdict, would my suit have your support ?'

Florence raised her piercing eyes from her work, and for a second fixed them on the clergyman's face.

'That depends, Mr. Plowden.'

'I am well off,' he went on eagerly, 'and I will tell you a secret. I have bought the advowson of this living ; I happened to hear that it was going, and got it a bargain,

I don't think that Halford's life is worth five years' purchase.'

'Why do you want to marry Eva, Mr. Plowden?' asked Florence, ignoring this piece of information; 'you are not in love with her?'

'In love! No, Miss Ceswick. I don't think that sensible men fall in love, they leave that to boys and women.'

'Oh! Then why do you want to marry Eva? It will be best to tell me frankly, Mr. Plowden.'

He hesitated, and then came to the conclusion that with a person of Florence's penetration, frankness was the best game.

'Well, as you must know, your sister is an extraordinarily beautiful woman.'

'And would therefore form a desirable addition to your establishment?'

'Precisely,' said Mr. Plowden.

‘Also,’ he went on, ‘she is a distinguished-looking woman, and quite the lady.’

Florence shuddered at the phrase.

‘And would therefore give you social status, Mr. Plowden?’

‘Yes. She is also sprung from an ancient family.’

Florence smiled, and looked at Mr. Plowden with an air that said more plainly than any words, ‘which *you* clearly are not.’

‘In short, I am anxious to get married, and I admire your sister Eva more than anybody I ever saw.’

‘All of which are very satisfactory reasons, Mr. Plowden; all you have to do is to convince my sister of the many advantages you have to offer her, and—to win her affections.’

‘Ah, Miss Ceswick, that is just the point. She told me that her affections are already

irredeemably engaged, and that she had none to give. If only I have the opportunity, however, I shall hope to be able to distance my rival.'

Florence looked at him scrutinizingly as she answered—

'You do not know Ernest Kershaw, or you would not be so confident.'

'Why am I not as good as this Ernest?' he asked; for Florence's remark, identical as it was with that of Jeremy, wounded his vanity intensely.

'Well, Mr. Plowden, I do not want to be rude, but it is impossible for me to conceive a woman's affections being won away from Ernest Kershaw by you. You are so very *different*.'

If Mr. Plowden wanted a straightforward answer he had certainly got it. For some moments he sat in sulky silence, and then he said—

‘I suppose if that is the case there is nothing to be done.’

‘I never said that. Women are frequently married whose affections are very much engaged elsewhere. You know how they win their wives in savage countries, Mr. Plowden : they catch them. Marriage by capture is one of the oldest institutions in the world.’

‘Well!’

‘Well, the same institution still obtains in England, only we don’t call it by that name. Do you suppose that no women are hunted down now-a-days? Ah, very many are; the would-be husband heads the pack, and all the loving relatives swell its cry.’

‘You mean that your sister can be hunted down,’ he said bluntly.

‘I! I mean nothing except that the persistent suitor on the spot often has a

better chance than the lover at a distance, however dear he may be.'

Then Mr. Plowden took his leave. Florence watched him walking down the garden path.

'I am glad Jeremy shook you soundly,' she said aloud. 'Poor Eva!'

CHAPTER VI.

MR. PLOWDEN GOES A-WOOING.

MR. PLOWDEN was not a suitor to let the grass grow under his feet. As he once took the trouble to explain to Florence, he considered that there was nothing like boldness in wooing, and he acted up to his convictions. Possessing no more delicacy of feeling than a bull elephant, and as much consideration for the lady as the elephant has for the lily it tramples under-foot, he, figuratively speaking, charged at Eva every time he saw her. He laid wait for her round corners and asked her to marry him ; he dropped in on her at odd hours, and insisted upon her marrying him. It was

quite useless for her to say, 'No, no, no,' or to appeal to his better feelings or compassion, for he had none. He simply would not listen to her ; but, encouraged thereto by the moral support which he received from Florence, he crushed the poor girl with his amorous eloquence.

It was a merry chase that Florence sat and watched with a dark smile on her scornful lip. In vain did the poor white doe dash along at her best speed, the great black hound was ever at her flank, and each time she turned came bounding at her throat. This idea of a chase, and a hound, and a doe, took such a strong possession of Florence's saturnine imagination, that she actually made a drawing of it, for she was a clever artist, throwing by a few strokes of her pencil a perfect likeness of Mr. Plowden into the fierce features of the hound. The doe she drew with Eva's dark

eyes, and when she had done them there was such a world of agony in their tortured gaze that she could not bear to look at them, and tore her picture up.

One day Florence came in and found her sister weeping.

‘Well, Eva, what is it now?’ she asked contemptuously.

‘Mr. Plowden,’ sobbed Eva.

‘Oh, Mr. Plowden again! Well, my dear, if you will be so beautiful, and encourage men, you must take the consequences.’

‘I never encouraged Mr. Plowden.’

‘Nonsense, Eva, you will not get me to believe that. If you do not encourage him, he would not go on making love to you. Gentlemen are not so fond of being snubbed.’

‘Mr. Plowden is not a gentleman,’ exclaimed Eva.

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Because a gentleman would not persecute one as he does. He will not take No for an answer, and to-day he kissed my hand. I tried to get it away from him, but I could not. Oh, I hate him!’

‘I tell you what it is, Eva; I have no patience with you and your fancies. Mr. Plowden is a very respectable man, he is a clergyman, and well off, altogether quite the sort of man to marry. Ah, Ernest—I am sick of Ernest! If he wanted to marry you, he should not go shooting people, and then running off to South Africa. Don’t you be so silly as to pin your faith to a boy like that. He was all very well to flirt with while he was here; now he has made a fool of himself and gone, and there is an end of him.’

‘But, Florence, I love Ernest. I think I love him more dearly every day, and I detest Mr. Plowden.’

‘Very likely. I don’t ask you to love Mr. Plowden; I ask you to marry him. What have love and marriage got to do with each other, I should like to know? If people were always to marry the people they loved, things would soon get into a pretty mess. Look here, Eva, as you know, I do not often obtrude myself or my own interests, but I think that I have a right to be considered a little in this matter. You have now got an opportunity of making a home for both of us. There is nothing against Mr. Plowden. Why should you not marry him as well as anybody else? Of course if you choose to sacrifice your own ultimate happiness and the comfort of us both to a silly whim, I cannot prevent you, you are your own mistress. Only I beg you to disabuse your mind of the idea that you could not be happy with Mr. Plowden, because you happen to fancy your-

self in love with Ernest. Why in six months you will have forgotten all about him.'

'But I don't want to forget about him.'

'I dare say not. That is your abominable egotism again. But whether you want to or not, you will. In a year or two, when you have your own interests and your children—'

'Florence, you may talk till midnight if you like, but once and for all, I will *not* marry Mr. Plowden,' and she swept out of the room in her stately way.

Florence laughed softly to herself as she said after her—

'Ah, yes you will, Eva. I shall be pinning a bride's veil on to that proud head of yours before you are six months older, my dear.'

Florence was quite right, it was only a question of time and cunningly-applied pressure. Eva yielded at last.

But there is no need for us to follow the

hateful story through its various stages. If by chance any of the readers of this history are curious about them, let them go and study from the life. Such cases exist around them, and, so far as the victims are concerned, there is a painful monotony in the development of their details and their conclusion.

And so it came to pass that one afternoon in the early summer, Florence, coming in from walking, found Mr. Plowden and her sister together in the little drawing-room. The latter was very pale, and shrinking with scared eyes and trembling limbs, up against the mantelpiece, near which she was standing. The former, looking big and vulgar, was standing over her and trying to take her hand.

‘Congratulate me, Miss Florence,’ he said.
‘Eva has promised to be mine.’

‘Has she?’ said Florence coldly. ‘How

glad you must be that Mr. Jones is out of the way !'

It was not a kind speech, but the fact was, there were few people in the world for whom Florence had such a complete contempt, or whom she regarded with such intense dislike as she did Mr. Plowden. The mere presence of the man irritated her beyond all bearing. He was an instrument suited to her purposes, so she used him, but she could find it in her heart to regret that the instrument was not more pleasant to handle.

Mr. Plowden turned pale at her taunt, and even in the midst of her fear and misery Eva smiled, and thought to herself that it was lucky for her hateful lover that somebody else was 'out of the way.'

Poor Eva !

'Poor Eva !' you think to yourself, my

reader ; ' there was nothing poor about her ; she was weak, she was contemptible.'

Oh, pause a while before you say so ! Remember that circumstances were against her ; remember that the idea of duty, drilled into her breast and the breasts of her ancestresses from generation to generation by the superior animal man, and fated as often as not to prove more of a bane than a blessing, was against her ; remember that her sister's ever-present influence overshadowed her, and that her suitor's vulgar vitality crushed her to the ground.

' Yet with it all she was weak,' you say. Well, she *was* weak, as weak as you must expect women to be after centuries of tyranny have bred weakness into their very nature. Why are women weak ? Because men have made them so. Because the law that was framed by men, and the public opinion which it has been their privilege to

direct, have from age to age drilled into them the belief that they are nought but chattels, to be owned and played with, existing for their pleasure and their passion, and ranking in value somewhere between their houses and their oxen. Because men, being the stronger animals, have crushed and forced them into certain moulds, saying, 'Thus shalt thou be.' Because men have systematically stunted their mental growth and denied them their natural rights, and that equality which is theirs before high heaven. Weak!—women have become weak because weakness is the passport to the favour of our sex. They have become foolish because education has been withheld from them and ability discouraged; they have become frivolous because frivolity has been declared to be the natural mission of woman. There is no male simpleton who does not like to have a bigger simpleton

than he is to lord it over. What would the empty-headed donkeys do if there were none emptier-headed than they to re-echo their brays? Truly the triumph of the stronger sex has been complete, for it has even succeeded in enlisting its victims in its service. The great instruments in the suppression of women, and in their retention at their present level, are women themselves. And yet before we go home and bully our wives and daughters, or to the club and sneer at the weaknesses and failings of those of others, let us be for a minute just. Which is the superior of the two—the woman or the man? In brute strength we have the advantage, but in intellect she is probably our equal, if only we will give her fair play. And in purity, in tenderness, in long-suffering, in fidelity, in all the Christian virtues, which is the superior in these things? Oh, man, whoever you are, think

of your mother and your sisters, think of the eyes that first looked love upon you, and the heart that dreams it still; think of her who nursed you in sickness, of her who stood by you in trouble when all others would have none of you, and then answer.

Woman, divinest of God's creatures, golden vessel turned to common uses, sweet star made to serve as the drunkard's lamp and the profligate's plaything; yes, plucked from your native skies to be worn alike by the fool, the knave, and the self-seeker, and yet faithful to them all; to be trod into the dirt by the earthy brute, and jeered at by the heartless cynic,—how immeasurable is the injustice, how vast the wrong that has been and is daily being heaped upon you!

How much we hear of woman's duty to man, how little of man's duty to woman! how hard we are upon your sins and weaknesses, how tender you are to ours!

Surely it will be a happy day for the civilized world, when, freed at last by the growth of knowledge and the increased sense of justice, woman takes her place as man's equal, no longer his vassal and the minister to his wants and pleasures only, but as his equal ; when she brings her fine intellect and enlarged capacity to bear upon the questions which hitherto he has been pleased to consider his exclusive right, and her trained intelligence to their solution ; when the social barriers are broken down, and she is untrammelled in the exercise of her natural rights, except by the truer sense of virtue and the stronger sense of duty which even now often elevate her far above our heads.

Poor Eva ! Yes, give her all your pity, but purge it of your contempt. It requires that a woman should possess a mind of unusual robustness to stand out against

circumstances such as hemmed her in, and this she did not possess. Nature, which had showered physical gifts upon her with such a lavish hand, had not given her that most useful of all gifts, the power of self-defence. She was made to yield, but this was her only fault. For the rest she was pure as the mountain snow, and with a heart of gold. Herself incapable of deceit, it never occurred to her to imagine it in others. She never suspected that Florence could have a motive in her advocacy of Mr. Plowden's cause. On the contrary, she was possessed to the full with that idea of duty and self-sacrifice which in some women amounts almost to madness. The notion so cleverly started by Florence, that she was bound to take this opportunity of giving her sister a home and the permanent protection of a brother-in-law, had taken a firm hold of her mind. As for the cruel wrong

and injustice which her marriage with Mr. Plowden would work to Ernest, it, strange as it may seem, never occurred to her to consider the matter in that light. She knew what her own sufferings were and always must be ; she knew that she would rather die than be false to Ernest ; but somehow she never looked at the other side of the picture, never considered the matter from Ernest's point of view. After the true womanly fashion, she was prepared to throw herself under her hideous Juggernaut called Duty, and let her inner life, the life of her heart, be crushed out of her ; but she never thought of the twin life which was welded with her own, and which must be crushed too. How curious it is that when women talk so much of their duties, they often think so little of the higher duty which they owe to the man whose whole love they have won, and whom they

cherish in their misguided hearts! The only feasible explanation of the mystery is, that one of the ideas that has been persistently drilled into the female breast, is that men have not any real feelings. It is vaguely supposed that they will 'get over it.' However this may be, when a woman decides to do violence to her natural feelings and contracts herself into an unholy marriage, the lover whom she deserts is generally the last person to be considered. Poor wretch! he will no doubt 'get over it.'

Fortunately many do.

CHAPTER VII.

OVER THE WATER.

MR. ALSTON and Ernest carried out their plans as regards sport. They went up to Lydenburg and had a month's wilderbeeste and blesbok shooting within three days' 'trek' with an ox-waggon from that curious little town. The style of life was quite new to Ernest, and he enjoyed it much. They had an ox-waggon and a span of sixteen 'salted' oxen, that is, oxen which will not die of lung-sickness, and in this lumbering vehicle they travelled about wherever fancy or the presence of buck took them. Mr. Alston and his boy Roger slept in the waggon, and Ernest in a little

tent which was pitched every night alongside, and never did he sleep sounder. There was a freshness and freedom about the life which charmed him. It is pleasant after the day's shooting or travelling to partake of the hearty meal, of which the *pièce de résistance* generally consists of a stew compounded indiscriminately of wilderbeeste beef, bustard, partridges, snipe, rice, and compressed vegetables—a dish, by the way, which is, if properly cooked, fit to set before a king. And then comes the pipe, or rather a succession of pipes, and the talk over the day's sport, and the effect of that long shot, and the hunting yarn that it 'reminds me' of. And after the yarn the well-known square bottle is produced, and the tin pannikins, out of which you have been drinking tea, are sent to the spring down in the hollow to be washed by the Zulu 'voorlooper,' who objects to going because of the 'spooks'

(ghosts) which he is credibly informed inhabit that hollow; and you indulge in your evening 'tot,' and smoke more pipes, and talk or ruminate as the fancy takes you. And then at last up comes the splendid African moon like a radiant queen rising from a throne of inky cloud, flooding the whole wide veldt with mysterious light, and reveals the long lines of game slowly travelling to their feeding-grounds along the ridges of the rolling plain.

Well, 'one more drop' and then to bed, having come to the admirable decision (so easy to make over-night, so hard to adhere to when the time comes) to 'trek from the yoke' at dawn. And then, having undressed yourself outside, all except the flannel shirt in which you are going to sleep, for there is no room to do so inside, you stow your clothes and boots away under your mackintosh sheet, for clothes wet through with

dew are unpleasant to wear before the sun is up, and creep on your hands and knees into your little tenement and wriggle between the blankets.

For a while, perhaps, you lie so, your pipe still between your lips, and gazing up through the opening of the little tent at two bright particular stars shining in the blue depths above, or watching the waving of the tall tambouki grass as the night wind goes sighing through it. And then, behold! the cold far stars draw near, grow warm with life, and change to Eva's eyes—if you have an Eva—and the yellow tambouki grass is her waving hair, and the sad whispering of the wind her voice, which speaks and tells you that she has come from far across the great seas to tell you that she loves you, to lull you to your rest.

What was it that frightened her so soon? The rattling of chains and the deep lowing

of the oxen, rising to be ready for the dawn. It has not come yet, but it is not far off. See, the grey light begins to gleam upon the oxen's horns, and far away, there in the east, the grey is streaked with primrose. Away with dreams, and up to pull the shivering Kafirs from their snug lair beneath the waggon, and to give the good nags, which must gallop wilderbeeste all to-day, a double handful of mealies before you start.

Ah neu-yak-trek! the great waggon strains and starts, and presently the glorious sun comes up, and you eat a crust of bread as you sit on the waggon-box, and wash it down with a mouthful of spirit, and feel that it is a splendid thing to get up early.

Then, about half-past eight, comes the halt for breakfast, and the welcome tub in the clear stream that you have been making for, and after breakfast, saddle up

the nags, take your bearings by the kopjé, and off after that great herd of wilderbeeste.

And so, my reader, day adds itself to day, and each day will find you healthier, happier, and stronger than the last. No letters, no newspapers, no duns, and no babies. Oh, think of the joy of it, effete Caucasian, and go buy an ox-waggon and do likewise.

After a month of this life, Mr. Alston came to the conclusion that there would now be no danger in descending into the low country towards Delagoa Bay in search of large game. Accordingly, having added to their party another would-be Nimrod, a gentleman just arrived from England in search of sport, they started. For the first month or so things went very well with them. They killed a good quantity of buffalo, koodoo, eland, and water-buck, also two giraffe, but to Ernest's great disappointment did not come across any rhinoceros,

and only got a shot at one lion, which he missed, though there were plenty round them. But soon the luck turned. First their horses died of the terrible scourge of all this part of South Africa, the horse sickness. They had given large prices for them, about seventy pounds each, as 'salted' animals, that is, animals that, having already had the sickness and recovered from it, were supposed to be proof against its attacks. But for all that they died one after another. This was only the beginning of evils. The day after the last horse died, the companion who had joined them at Lydenburg was taken ill of the fever. Mr. Jeffries, for that was his name, was a very reserved English gentleman of good fortune, something over thirty years of age. Like most people who came into close relationship with Ernest, he had taken a considerable fancy to him, and the two were, compara-

tively speaking, intimate. During the first stages of his fever, Ernest nursed him like a brother, and was at length rewarded by seeing him in a fair way to recovery. On one unlucky day, however, Jeffries being so much better, Mr. Alston and Ernest went out to try and shoot a buck, as they were short of meat, leaving the camp in charge of the boy Roger. For a long while they could find no game, but at last Ernest came across a fine bull eland standing rubbing himself against a mimosa thorn tree. A shot from his express, planted well behind the shoulder, brought the noble beast down quite dead, and having laden the two Kafirs with them with the tongue, liver, and as much of the best meat as they could carry, they started back for camp.

Meanwhile one of the sudden and tremendous thunder-storms peculiar to South

Africa came swiftly up against the wind, heralding its arrival by a blast of ice-cold air ; and presently they were staggering along in the teeth of a fearful tempest. The whole sky was lurid with lightning, the hills echoed with the continuous roll of thunder, and the rain came down in sheets. In the thick of it all, exhausted, bewildered, and wet to the skin, they reached the camp ; there a sad sight awaited them. In front of the tent which served as a hospital for Jeffries was a large ant-heap, and on this ant-heap, clad in nothing but a flannel shirt, sat Jeffries himself. The rain was beating on his bare head and emaciated face, and the ice-cold breeze was tossing his dripping hair. One hand he kept raising to the sky to let the cold water fall upon it : the other the boy Roger held, and by it vainly attempted to drag him back to the tent. But Jeffries was a man of large

build, and the little lad might as well have tried to drag an ox.

‘Isn’t it glorious?’ shouted the delirious man as they came up; ‘I’ve got cool at last.’

‘Yes, and you will soon be cold, poor fellow,’ muttered Mr. Alston as they hurried up.

They got him back into the tent, and in half an hour he was beyond all hope. He did not rave much, but kept repeating a single word in every possible tone. That word was—

‘*Alice.*’

At dawn on the following morning he died with it on his lips. Ernest often wondered afterwards who ‘Alice’ could be.

Next day they dug a deep grave under an ancient thorn-tree, and reverently laid him to his rest. On his breast they piled great stones to keep away the jackals, filling in the cracks with earth.

Then they left him to his sleep. It is a sad task that, burying a comrade in the lonely wilderness.

As they were approaching the waggon again, little Roger sobbing bitterly, for Mr. Jeffries had been very kind to him, and a first experience of death is dreadful to the young, they met the Zulu voorlooper, a lad called Jim, who had been out all day watching the cattle as they grazed. He saluted Mr. Alston after the Zulu fashion, by lifting the right arm and saying the word 'Inkoos,' and then stood still.

'Well, what is it, boy?' asked Mr. Alston. 'Have you lost the oxen?'

'No, Inkoos, the oxen are safe at the yoke. It is this. When I was sitting on the kopjé yonder, watching that the oxen of the Inkoos should not stray, an Intombi (young girl) from the kraal under the mountain yonder came to me. She is the

daughter of a Zulu mother who fell into the hands of a Basutu dog, and my half-cousin.'

'Well?'

'Inkoos, I have met this girl before, I have met her when I have been sent to buy "*maas*" (butter-milk) at the kraal.'

'Good!'

'Inkoos, the girl came to bring heavy news, such as will press upon your heart. Sikukuni, chief of the Bapedi, who lives over yonder under the Blue Mountains, has declared war against the Boers.'

'I hear.'

'Sikukuni wants rifles for his men such as the Boers use. He has heard of the Inkosis hunting here. To-night he will send an Impi to kill the Inkosis and take their guns.'

'These are the words of the Intombi?'

'Yes, Inkoos, these are her very words. She was sitting outside the tent grinding

“imphi” (Kafir corn) for beer when she heard Sikukuni’s messenger order her father to call the men together to kill us to-night.’

‘I hear. At what time of the night was the killing to be?’

‘At the first break of the dawn, so that they may have light to take the waggon away by.’

‘Good! we shall escape them. The moon will be up in an hour, and we can trek away.’

The lad’s face fell.

‘Alas!’ he said, ‘it is impossible; there is a spy watching the camp now. He is up there among the rocks; I saw him as I brought the oxen home. If we move he will report it, and we shall be overtaken in an hour.’

Mr. Alston thought for a moment, and then made up his mind with the rapidity

that characterizes men who spend their life in dealing with savage races.

‘Mazooku!’ he called to a Zulu who was sitting smoking by the camp fire, a man whom Ernest had hired as his particular servant. The man rose and came to him, and saluted.

He was not a very tall man; but, standing there nude except for the ‘moocha’ round his centre, his proportions, especially those of the chest and lower limbs, looked gigantic. He had been a soldier in one of Cetywayo’s regiments, but having been so indiscreet as to break through some of the Zulu marriage laws, had been forced to fly for refuge to Natal, where he had become a groom, and picked up a peculiar language which he called English. Even among a people where all the men are fearless, he bore a reputation for bravery. Leaving him standing awhile, Mr. Alston rapidly

explained the state of the case to Ernest, and what he proposed to do. Then turning, he addressed the Zulu.

‘Mazooku, the Inkoos here, your master, tells me that he thinks you a brave man.’

The Zulu’s handsome face expanded into a smile that was positively alarming in its extent.

‘He says that you told him that when you were Cetywayo’s man in the Undi Regiment, you once killed four Basutus, who set upon you together.’

Mazooku lifted his right arm and saluted, by way of answer, and then glanced slightly at the assegai wounds on his chest.

‘Well, I tell your master that I do not believe you. It is a lie you speak to him; you ran away from Cetywayo because you did not like to fight and be killed as the king’s ox, as a brave man should.’

The Zulu coloured up under his dusky skin, and again glanced at his wounds.

‘Ow-w!’ he said.

‘Bah! there is no need for you to look at those scratches, they were left by women’s nails. You are nothing but a woman. Silence! who told you to speak? If you are not a woman, show it. There is an armed Basutu among those rocks. He watches us. Your master cannot eat and sleep in peace when he is watched. Take that big “bangwan” (stabbing assegai) you are so fond of showing, and kill him, or die a coward. He must make no sound, remember.’

Mazooku turned towards Ernest for confirmation of the order. A Zulu always likes to take his orders straight from his own chief. Mr. Alston noticed it, and added—

‘I am the Inkoosi’s mouth, and speak his words.’

Mazooku saluted again, and turning, went to the waggon to fetch his assegai.

‘Tread softly, or you will wake him ; and he will run from so great a man,’ Mr. Alston called after him sarcastically.

‘I go among the rocks to seek “mouti”’ (medicine), the Zulu answered with a smile.

‘We are in a serious mess, my boy,’ said Mr. Alston to Ernest, ‘and it is a toss-up if we get out of it. I taunted that fellow so that there may be no mistake about the spy. He must be killed, and Mazooku would rather die himself than not kill him now.’

‘Would it not have been safer to send another man with him?’

‘Yes ; but I was afraid that if the scout saw two men coming towards him he would make off, however innocent they might look. Our horses are dead, and if that fellow escapes we shall never get out of this place alive. It would be folly to

expect Basutus to distinguish between Boers and Englishmen when their blood is up, and besides, Sikukuni has sent orders that we are to be killed, and they would not dare to disobey. Look, there goes Mr. Mazooku with an assegai as big as a fire-shovel.'

The kopjé, or stony hill, where the spy was hid, was about three hundred yards from the little hollow in which the camp was formed, and across the stretch of bushy plain between the two, Mazooku was quietly strolling, his assegai in one hand and two long sticks in the other. Presently he vanished in the shadow, for the sun was rapidly setting, and after what seemed a long pause to Ernest, who was watching his movements through a pair of field-glasses, reappeared walking along the shoulder of the hill right against the skyline, his eyes fixed upon the ground as

though he were searching among the crevices of the rocks for the medical herbs which Zulus prize.

All of a sudden Ernest saw the stalwart form straighten itself and spring, with the assegai in its hand raised to the level of its head, down into a dip, which hid it from sight. Then came a pause, lasting perhaps for twenty seconds. On the further side of the dip was a large flat rock, which was straight in a line with the fiery ball of the setting sun. Suddenly a tall figure sprang up out of the hollow on to this rock, followed by another figure, in whom Ernest recognized Mazooku. For a moment the two men, looking from their position like figures afire, struggled together on the top of the flat stone, and Ernest could clearly distinguish the quick flash of their spears as they struck at each other, then they vanished together over the edge of the stone.

‘By Jove!’ said Ernest, who was trembling with excitement. ‘I wonder how it has ended.’

‘We shall know presently,’ answered Mr. Alston, coolly. ‘At any rate the die is cast one way or other, and we may as well make a bolt for it. Now, you Zulus, down with those tents and get the oxen inspanned, and look quick about it, if you don’t want a Basutu assegai to send you to join the spirit of Chaka.’

The voorlooper Jim had by this time communicated his alarming intelligence to the driver and other Kafirs, and Mr. Alston’s exhortation to look sharp was quite unnecessary. Ernest never saw camp struck or oxen inspanned with such rapidity before. But before the first tent was fairly down, they were all enormously relieved to see Mazooku coming trotting cheerfully across the plain, droning a little Zulu song

as he ran. His appearance, however, was by no means cheerful, for he was perfectly drenched with blood, some of it flowing from a wound in his left shoulder, and the rest evidently till recently the personal property of somebody else. Arrived in front of where Mr. Alston and Ernest were standing, he raised his broad assegai, which was still dripping blood, and saluted.

‘I hear,’ said Mr. Alston.

‘I have done the Inkoosi’s bidding. There were two of them, the first I killed easily in the hollow, but the other, a very big man, fought well for a Basutu. They are dead, and I threw them into a hole, that their brothers might not find them easily.’

‘Good! go wash yourself and get your master’s things into the waggon. Stop, let me sew up that cut. How came you to be so awkward as to get touched by a Basutu?’

‘Inkoos, he was very quick with his spear, and he fought like a cat.’

Mr. Alston did not reply, but taking a stout needle and some silk from a little huswife he carried in his pocket, he quickly stitched up the assegai gash, which fortunately was not a deep one. Mazooku stood without flinching till the job was finished, and then retired to wash himself at the spring.

The short twilight rapidly faded into darkness, or rather into what would have been darkness had it not been for the half-grown moon, which was to serve to light them on their path. Then a large fire having been lit on the site of the camp, to make it appear as though it were still pitched there, the order was given to start. The oxen, obedient to the voice of the driver, strained at the trek-tow, the waggon creaked and jolted, and they began their

long flight for life. The order of march was as follows: Two hundred yards ahead of the waggon walked a Kafir, with strict orders to keep his eyes very wide open indeed, and report in the best way possible under the circumstances if he detected any signs of an ambush. At the head of the long line of cattle, leading the two front oxen by a 'rim' or strip of buffalo hide, was the Zulu boy Jim, to whose timely discovery they owed their lives, and by the side of the waggon the driver, a Cape Hottentot, plodded along in fear and trembling. On the waggon-box itself, each with a Winchester repeating rifle on his knees, and keeping a sharp look-out into the shadows, sat Mr. Alston and Ernest. In the hinder part of the waggon, also armed with a rifle and keeping a keen look-out, sat Mazooku. The other servants marched alongside, and the boy Roger

was asleep inside, on the 'cartle' or hide bed.

And so they travelled on hour after hour. Now they bumped down terrific hills strewn with boulders, which would have smashed anything less solid than an African ox waggon to splinters; now they crept along a dark valley, that looked weird and solemn in the moonlight, expecting to see Sekukuni's Impi emerging from every clump of bush; and now again they waded through mountain streams. At last, about midnight, they emerged on to a plain dividing two stretches of mountainous country, and here they halted for a while to give the oxen, which were fortunately in good condition and fat after their long rest, a short breathing time. Then on again through the long quiet night, on, still on, till the dawn found them the other side of the wide plain at the foot of the mountain range.

Here they rested for two hours, and let the oxen fill themselves with the lush grass. They had travelled thirty miles since the yokes were put upon their necks, not far according to our way of journeying, but very far for cumbersome oxen over an almost impassable country. As soon as the sun was well up they inspanned again, and hurried forward, bethinking them of the Basutu horde who would now be pressing on their spoor ; on with brief halts through all that day and the greater part of the following night, till the cattle began to fall down in the yokes—till at last they crossed the boundary and were in Transvaal territory.

When dawn broke, Mr. Alston took the glasses and examined the track over which they had fled. There was nothing to be seen except a great herd of hartebeest.

‘ I think that we are safe now,’ he said at

last, 'and thank God for it. Do you know what those Basutu devils would have done if they had caught us?'

'What?'

'They would have skinned us, and made our hearts and livers into "mouti" (medicine), and eaten them to give them the courage of the white man.'

'By Jove!' said Ernest.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HOMERIC COMBAT.

WHEN Mr. Alston and Ernest found themselves safe upon Transvaal soil, they determined to give up the idea of following any more big game for the present, and to content themselves with the comparatively humble vilderbeeste, blesbok, springbok, and other small antelopes. The plan they pursued was to slowly journey from one point of the country to another, stopping wherever they found the buck particularly plentiful. In this way they got excellent sport, and spent several months very agreeably, with the further advantage that Ernest obtained considerable knowledge

of the country and its inhabitants, the Boers.

It was a wild rough life that they led, but by no means a lowering one. The continual contact with nature in all her moods, and in her wildest shapes, was to a man of impressionable mind like Ernest an education in itself. His mind absorbed something of the greatness round him, and seemed to grow wider and deeper during those months of lonely travel. The long struggle too with the hundred difficulties which arise in waggon journeys, and the quickness of decision necessary to avoid danger or discomfort in such a mode of life were of great service to him in shaping his character. Nor was he left without suitable society, for in his companion he found a friend for whose talents and intelligence he had the highest respect.

Mr. Alston was a very quiet individual ;

he never said a thing unless he had first considered it in all its bearings; but when he did say it it was always well worth listening to. He was a man who had spent his life in the closest observation of human nature in the rough. Now you, my reader, may think that there is a considerable difference between human nature 'in the rough,' as exemplified by a Zulu warrior stalking out of his kraal in a kaross and brandishing an assegai, and yourself, say, strolling up the steps of your club in a frock-coat and twirling one of Brigg's umbrellas. But as a matter of fact the difference is of a most superficial character, bearing the same proportion to the common substance that the furniture polish does to the table. Scratch the polish, and there you have best raw Zulu human nature. Indeed, to anybody who has taken the trouble to study the question, it is simply absurd to

observe how powerless high civilization has been to do anything more than veneer that raw material, which remains identical in each case.

To return, the result of Mr. Alston's observations had been to make him an extremely shrewd companion, and an excellent judge of men and their affairs. There were few subjects which he had not quietly considered during all the years that he had been trading or shooting or serving the Government in one capacity or another ; and Ernest was astonished to find that, although he had only spent some four months of his life in England, how intimate was his knowledge of the state of political parties, of the great social questions of the day, and even of matters connected with literature and art. It is not too much to say that it was from Mr. Alston that Ernest imbibed principles on all these subjects which he never deserted

in after life, and which subsequent experience proved to be for the most part sound.

And thus, between shooting and philosophical discussion, the time passed on pleasantly enough, till at length they drew near to Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal, where they had decided to go and rest the oxen for a month or two before making arrangements for a real big game excursion up towards central Africa. They struck into the Pretoria road just above a town called Heidelberg, about sixty miles from the former place, and proceeded by easy stages towards their destination.

As they went on, they generally found it convenient to outspan at spots which it was evident had been used for the same purpose by some waggon which was travelling one stage ahead of them. So frequently did this happen, that during their first five or six outspans they were able on no less

than three occasions to avail themselves of the dying fires of their predecessors' camp. This was a matter of lively interest to Ernest, who always did cook ; and a very good cook he became. One of the great bothers of South African travelling is the fire question. Indeed, how to make sufficient fire to boil a kettle when you have no fuel to make it of is *the* great question of South African travel. A ready-made fire is therefore peculiarly acceptable, and for the last half-hour of the trek Ernest was always in a great state of expectation as to whether the waggon before them had or had not been considerate enough to leave theirs burning. Thus, when it came to pass that one morning, when they were about fifteen miles from Pretoria, which they expected to reach the same evening, and the waggon was slowly drawing up to the outspan place, Ernest, accompanied by Mazooku, who lounged

about after him like a black shadow, ran forward to see if their predecessors had or had not been considerate. In this instance energy was rewarded, for the fire was still burning.

‘Hoorah!’ said Ernest; ‘get the sticks, Mazooku, and go and fill the kettle. By Jove! there’s a knife.’

There was a knife, a many bladed knife with a buck-horn handle and a corkscrew in it, left lying by the dying fire. Ernest took it up and looked at it, somehow it seemed familiar to him. He turned it round and looked at the silver plate upon it, and suddenly started.

‘What is the matter, Ernest?’ said Mr. Alston, who had joined them.

‘Look there,’ he answered, pointing to two initials cut on the knife.

‘Well, I see, some fellow has left his knife, so much the better for the finder.’

‘You have heard me speak of my friend Jeremy. That is his knife. I gave it to him years ago. Look—J. J.’

‘Nonsense, it is some knife like it, I have seen hundreds of that make.’

‘I believe that it is the same. He must be there.’

Mr. Alston shrugged his shoulders. ‘Not probable,’ he said.

Ernest made no answer. He stood staring at the knife.

‘Have you written to your people lately, Ernest?’

‘No; the last letter I wrote was down there in Sekukuni’s country; you remember I sent it by the Basutu who was going to Lydenburg, just before Jeffries died.’

‘Like enough he never got to Lydenburg. He would not have dared to go to Lydenburg after the war broke out. You should write.’

'I mean to from Pretoria, but somehow I have had no heart for writing.'

Nothing more was said about the matter, and Ernest put the knife into his pocket.

That evening they trekked down through the 'Poort' that commands the most charming of the South African towns, and on the plain below, Pretoria, bathed in the bright glow of the evening sunshine, smiled its welcome to them. Mr. Alston, who knew the town, determined to trek straight through it, and outspan the waggon on the further side, where he thought there would be better grazing for the cattle. Accordingly they rumbled on past the gaol, past the pleasant white building which afterwards became Government House, and which was at that moment occupied by the English Special Commissioner and his staff, about whose doings all sorts of rumours had reached them during their journey,

and on to the market square. This area was at the moment crowded with Boer waggons, whose owners had trekked in to celebrate their 'nachtmal' (communion), of which it is their habit, in company with their wives and children, to partake four times a year. The 'Volksraad,' or local parliament, was also in special session to consider the proposals made to it on behalf of the Imperial Government, so that the little town was positively choked with visitors. The road down which they were passing ran past the building used as Government Offices, and between this and the Dutch church a considerable crowd was gathered, which, to judge from the shouts and volleys of oaths, Dutch and English, that proceeded from it, was working itself up into a state of excitement.

'Hold on,' shouted Ernest to the voorlooper, and then turning to Mr. Alston,

‘There is a jolly row going on there, let us go and see what it is.’

‘All right, my boy, where the fighting is, there will the Englishmen be gathered together,’ and they climbed down off the waggon and made for the crowd.

The row was this. Among the Boers assembled for the ‘nachtmaal’ festival was a well-known giant of the name of Van Zyl. This man’s strength was a matter of public notoriety all over the country, and many were the feats which were told of him. Amongst others it was said that he could bear the weight of the after part of an African buck waggon on his shoulders, with a load of three thousand pounds of corn upon it, whilst the wheels were greased. He stood about six foot seven high, weighed eighteen stone and a half, and had a double row of teeth. On the evening in question, this remarkable specimen of humanity was

sitting on his waggon-box with a pipe, of which the size was proportionate to his own, clenched firmly between his double row of teeth. About ten paces from him stood a young Englishman, also of large size, though he looked quite small beside the giant, who was contemplating the phenomenon on the waggon-box, and wondering how many inches he measured round the chest. That young Englishman had just got off a newly-arrived waggon, and his name was Jeremy Jones.

To these advance a cringing Hottentot boy of small size. The Hottentot is evidently the servant or slave of the giant, and a man standing by Jeremy, who understands Dutch, informs him that he is telling his master that an ox has strayed. Slowly the giant rouses himself, and descending from the waggon-box, seizes the trembling Tottie with one hand, and taking a rim of buffalo hide, lashes him to the waggon wheel.

‘Now,’ remarked Jeremy’s acquaintance, ‘you will see how a Boer deals with a nigger.’

‘You don’t mean to say that great brute is going to beat that poor little devil?’

Just then a small fat woman put her head out of a tent pitched by the waggon, and inquired what the matter was. She was the giant’s wife. On being informed of the straying of the ox, her wrath knew no bounds.

‘Slaat em ! slaat de swartsel ’ (Thrash him ! thrash the black creature), she cried out in a shrill voice, running to the waggon, and with her own fair hands drawing out a huge ‘sjambock,’ that is, a strip of prepared hippopotamus hide, used to drive the after oxen with, and giving it to her spouse, ‘Cut the liver out of the black devil,’ she went on, ‘but mind you don’t hit his head, or he won’t be able to go to work

afterwards. Never mind about making the blood come, I have got lots of salt to rub in.'

Her harangue, and the sight of the Hottentot tied to the wheel, had by this time attracted quite a crowd of Boers and Englishmen who were idling about the market square.

'Softly, Vrouw, softly, I will thrash enough to satisfy even you, and we all know that must be very hard where a black creature is in question.'

A roar of laughter from the Dutch people round greeted this sally of wit, and the giant, taking the sjambock with a good-humoured smile, for he was, like most giants, easy-tempered by nature, lifted it, whirled his great arm, as thick as the leg of an average man, round his head, and brought it down on the back of the miserable Hottentot. The poor wretch yelled

with pain, and no wonder, for the greasy old shirt he wore was divided clean in two, together with the skin beneath it, and the blood was pouring from the gash.

‘Allamachter! dat is een lekker slaat’ (Almighty! that was a nice one), said the old woman, at which the crowd laughed again.

But there was one man who did not laugh, and that man was Jeremy. On the contrary, his clear eyes flashed, and his brown cheek burned with indignation. Nor did he stop at that. Stepping forward he placed himself between the giant and the howling Hottentot, and said to the former in the most nervous English, ‘You are a damned coward.’

The Boer stared at him and smiled, and then, turning, asked what the ‘English fellow’ was saying. Somebody translated Jeremy’s remark, whereupon the Boer, who

was not a bad-natured fellow, smiled again, and remarked that Jeremy must be madder than the majority of 'accursed Englishmen.' Then he turned to continue thrashing the Hottentot, but, lo! the mad Englishman was still there. This put him out.

'Footsack, carl, ik is Van Zyl' (Get out, fellow, I am Van Zyl). This was interpreted to Jeremy by the bystanders.

'All right, and tell him that I am Jones, a name he may have heard before,' was the reply.

'What does this brain-sick fellow want?' shouted the giant.

Jeremy explained that he wanted him to stop his brutality.

'And what will the little man do if I refuse?'

'I shall try to make you,' was the answer.

This remark was received with a shout of laughter from the crowd which had

now collected, in which the giant joined very heartily when it was interpreted to him.

Giving Jeremy a shove to one side, he again lifted the great sjambock, with the purpose of bringing it down on the Hottentot. Another second, and Jeremy had snatched the whip from his hand, and sent it flying fifty yards away. Then realizing that his antagonist was really in earnest, the great Dutchman solemnly set himself to crush him. Doubling a fist which was the size of a Welsh leg of mutton, he struck with all his strength straight at the Englishman's head. Had the blow caught Jeremy, it would in all probability have killed him; but he was a practised boxer, and without moving his body, he swung his head to one side. The Boer's fist passed him harmlessly, and striking the panel of the waggon, went clean through

it. Next instant several of the giant's double row of teeth were rolling loose in his mouth. Jeremy had returned the stroke by a right-hander, into which he put all his power, and which would have knocked any other man backwards.

A great shout from the assembled Englishmen followed this blow, and a counter-shout from the crowd of Dutchmen, who pointed triumphantly to the hole in the stout yellow-wood panel made by their champion's fist, and asked who the madman was who dared to stand against him.

The Boer turned and spat out some of his superfluous teeth, and at the same instant a young Englishman came and caught hold of Jeremy by the arm.

'For Heaven's sake, my dear fellow, be careful! That man will kill you, he is the strongest man in the Transvaal. You *are* a fellow to be proud of though.'

‘He may try,’ said Jeremy laconically, stripping off his coat and waistcoat. ‘Will you hold these for me?’

‘Hold them!’ answered the young fellow, who was a good sort; ‘ay, that I will, and I would give half I have to see you lick him. Dodge him; don’t let him strike you, or he will kill you. I saw him stun an ox once with a blow of his fist.’

Jeremy smiled.

‘Stop,’ he said. ‘Ask that coward, if I best him, if he will let off that miserable beggar?’ and he pointed to the trembling Hottentot.

The question was put, and the great man answered ‘Yah, yah!’ ironically, and then expressed his intention of knocking Jeremy into small pieces in the course of the next two minutes.

Then they faced one another. The giant was a trifle over six foot seven high;

Jeremy was a trifle under six foot two and a half, and looked short beside him. But one or two critical observers, looking at the latter now that he was stripped for the encounter, shrewdly guessed that the Dutchman would have his work cut out. Jeremy did not, it is true, scale more than fourteen stone six, but his proportions were perfect. The great deep chest, the brawny arms, not very large, but a mass of muscle, the short strong neck, the quick eye and massive leg, all bespoke the strength of a young Hercules. It was evident too that though he was so young, and not yet come to his full power, he was in the most perfect training. The Boer, on the other hand, was enormous, but his flesh was somewhat soft. Still, knowing his feats, the Englishmen present sighed for their champion, feeling that he had no chance.

For a moment they stood facing each

other, then Jeremy made a feint, and, getting in, planted a heavy blow with his left hand on his adversary's chest. But he was to pay for it, for next second the Dutchman got in his right hand, and Jeremy was lifted clean off his feet, and sent flying backwards among the crowd.

The Boers cheered, the giant smiled, and the Englishmen looked sad. They knew how it would be.

But Jeremy picked himself up little the worse. The stroke had struck the muscles of his chest, and had not hurt him greatly. As he advanced the gradually-increasing crowd of Englishmen cheered him warmly, and he swore in his heart that he would justify those cheers or die for it.

It was at this juncture that Ernest and Mr. Alston came up.

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed the former, ‘it is Jeremy.’

Mr. Alston took in the situation at a glance.

‘Don’t let him see you, you will put him off,’ he said. ‘Get behind me.’

Ernest obeyed, overwhelmed. Mr. Alston shook his head. He recognized that Jeremy had a poor chance, but he did not say so to Ernest.

Meanwhile Jeremy came up and faced the Dutchman. Encouraged by his late success, presently his adversary struck a tremendous blow at him. Jeremy dodged, and next instant succeeded in landing such a fearful right and left full on the giant’s face that the latter went reeling backwards.

A yell of frantic excitement arose from the English portion of the crowd. This was indeed a David.

The Dutchman soon recovered, however, and in his turn, rendered more cautious, kept out of Jeremy’s reach, trying to strike

him down from a distance. For a round or two no important blow was struck, till at last a brilliant idea took possession of the young fellow who had charge of Jeremy's coat.

'Hit him about the body,' he whispered, 'he's soft.'

Jeremy took the advice, and next round succeeded in getting in two or three blows straight from the shoulder, and every one of them bruised the huge body sadly, and made it rather short of wind.

Next round he repeated the same tactics, receiving himself a stroke on the shoulder that for a moment rendered his left arm helpless. Before another second was over, however, he had his revenge, and the blood was pouring from his adversary's lips.

And now did the popular excitement on both sides grow intense, for to the interest attaching to the encounter was added that

of national feeling, which was then at a high state of tension. Englishmen, Dutchmen, and a mob of Kafirs yelled and shouted, and each of the former two felt that the honour of his people was on the issue. And yet it was an unequal fight.

‘I believe that your friend will be a match for Van Zyl,’ said Mr. Alston coolly, but the flash of his eye belied his coolness; ‘and I tell you what, he’s a devilish fine fellow too.’

At that moment, however, an untoward thing happened. The giant struck out his strongest, and Jeremy could not succeed in entirely warding off the blow, though he broke its force. Crashing through his guard it struck him on the forehead, and for a moment he dropped senseless. His second rushed up and dashed some water over him, and in another instant he was on his legs again; but for the rest of that round

he contented himself with dodging his adversary's attack, at which the Dutchmen cheered, thinking that his iron strength was broken.

But presently, when for the sixth time Jeremy came up with the same quiet look of determination in his eyes, and, except that the gaping of the nostrils and the twitching of the lip showed a certain measure of distress, looking but little the worse, they turned with anxiety to examine the condition of the giant. It was not very promising. He was perspiring profusely, and his enormous chest was rising and falling irregularly. Wherever Jeremy's strokes had fallen, too, a great blue bruise had risen. It was evident that his condition was the worse of the two, but still the Boers had little doubt of the issue. It could not be that the man who had once for a bet quelled the struggles of a

wild ox, holding it for the space of five minutes by the horn, could be worsted by an English lad. So they called on him to stop playing with the boy and crush him.

Thus encouraged the giant came on, striking out with fearful force, but wildly for he could not box. For thirty seconds or more Jeremy contented himself with avoiding the blows, then, seeing an opportunity, he planted a heavy one on his adversary's chest. This staggered him and threw him off his guard, and taking the offensive, Jeremy dodged in right under the huge fists, and hit upwards with all his power. 'Thud, thud!' The sound of the blows could be heard fifty yards off. Nor were they without their effect. The giant staggered, and amidst fearful shouts and groans fell like an ox struck with a pole-axe. But it was not over yet. In another moment he was on his legs again,

and spitting out blood and teeth, came reeling straight at Jeremy, a fearful and alarming spectacle. As he came Jeremy again hit him in the face, but it did not stop him, and in another second the huge arms had closed round him and held him like a vice.

‘Not fair ! no holding !’ shouted the Englishmen, but the Boer held on. Indeed he did more. Putting all his vast strength into the effort, he strained and tugged, meaning to lift Jeremy up and dash him on the ground. But lo, amidst frantic shouts from the crowd, Jeremy stood firm, moving not an inch. Whereupon the Boers called out, saying that he was not a mortal, but a man possessed with a devil. Again the Dutchman gripped him, and this time succeeded in lifting him a few inches from the ground.

‘By George, he will throw him next

time,' said Mr. Alston to Ernest, who was shaking like a leaf with the excitement ; 'look, he is turning white, the grip is choking him.'

And indeed Jeremy was in evil case, for his senses were fast being crushed out of him in that fearful embrace, and he was thinking with bitter sorrow that he must fail after all, for an Englishman does not like to be beat even when he has fought his best. Just then it was, when things were beginning to swim around him, that a voice he loved, and which he had been listening for these many months, rang in his ears ; whether it was fancy or whether he really heard it he knew not.

'Remember " Marsh Joe," Jeremy, and *lift him*. Don't be beat. For God's sake *lift him !*'

Now there was a trick, which I will not tell you, my reader, but which a famous

Eastern Counties wrestler, known as Marsh Joe, had taught to Jeremy. So well had he taught him, indeed, that at the age of seventeen Jeremy had hoisted his teacher with his own trick.

Just at the moment that Jeremy heard the voice, the giant shifted his hold a little, preparatory to making a fresh effort, and thus enabled his antagonist to fill his lungs with air. Ernest saw the broad white chest heave with relief (for by this time most of the upper clothing of the combatants had been wrenched away), and the darkening eye grow bright again, and he knew that Jeremy had heard him, and that he *would* conquer or die where he was.

And then, lo and behold! just as the Boer, leisurely enough—feeling that at last he was master of the situation—prepared himself for the final struggle, suddenly the

Englishman advanced his right leg a few inches, and with the rapidity of lightning entirely shifted his grip; and then he gathered himself for the effort. What mighty reserve of strength he drew on, who can say; but Ernest's voice had excited it, and it came at his call; and he did a thing that few living men could have done, and the fame whereof will go down in South Africa from generation to generation. For the lithe arms tightened and gripped till they sunk in almost level with the flesh of his mighty foe, and then slowly he began to gather purchase, swaying backwards and forwards.

‘Make an end of him! Make an end of him!’ shouted the Boers; but behold, their champion's eyes are starting from his blackened face; he cannot stir.

To and fro sways Jeremy, and now the giant's feet are lifted from the ground. And then one mighty effort—oh, gallant

Jeremy!—up, still up above the gasping
of the wonder-stricken crowd, up to his
shoulder—*by Heaven, over it!*

Crash! Van Zyl fell, to be carried away
by six strong men, a cripple for life.

CHAPTER IX.

ERNEST'S LOVE LETTER.

CHEER after cheer arose from the Englishmen around, and angry curses from the Dutchmen, as Jeremy turned to look at the senseless carcass of the giant. But even as he turned, exhausted nature gave out, and he fell fainting into Ernest's arms.

Then did selected individuals of his fellow-countrymen come forward and bear him reverently to a restaurant called the 'European,' where the proprietor—himself an old Eton fellow—met him, and washed and clothed and restored him, and vowed with tears in his eyes that he, Jeremy, should live at his expense for as long as he liked

—ay, even if he chose to drink nothing meaner than champagne all day long. For thus it is that Englishmen greet one who ministers to that deepest rooted of all their feelings, national pride. And then, when at length he had been brought to, and refreshed with a tumbler full of dry Monopole, and wonderingly shaken Ernest by the hand, the enthusiasm of the crowd outside burst its bounds, and they poured into the restaurant, and seizing Jeremy and the chair whereon he sat, they bore him in triumph round the market square, to the tune of God save the Queen, a proceeding that would have ended in provoking a riot, had not an aide-de-camp from His Excellency the Special Commissioner, who sent a message begging that they would desist, succeeded in persuading them to return to the restaurant. And here they all dined, and forced Jeremy to drink a great deal more dry Monopole

than was good for him, with the result that for the first and last time in his life, he was persuaded into making an after dinner speech. As far as it was reported it ran something like this :

‘ Dear friends (cheers) and Englishmen,’ (renewed cheers) pause—‘ all making great fuss about nothing (cheers and shouts of No, no !). Fight the Dutchman again to-morrow—very big but soft as putty—anybody fight him (frantic cheering). Glad I wasn’t thrashed, as you all seem so pleased. Don’t know why you are pleased. ’Spose you didn’t like the Dutchman. ’Fraid he hurt himself over my shoulder. Wonder what he did it for. Sit down now. Dear friends, dear old Ernest, been looking for you for long while,’ and he turned his glassy eye on to Ernest, who cheered frantically, under the impression that Jeremy had just said something very much to the point.

‘Sit down now (no, no, go on). Can’t go on, quite pumped—very thirsty too (give him some more champagne—Open a fresh case). Wish Eva and Doll were here, don’t you? (Loud cheers). Gemman, (cheers) no, not gemman, friends, (louder cheers)—no, not gemman, friends—English brothers, (yet louder cheers) I give you a toast. Eva and Doll, you all know ’em and love ’em, or if you don’t you would, you see, if you did, you know.’ (Frantic outburst of cheering, during which Jeremy tries to resume his seat, but gracefully drops on to the floor, and begins singing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ under the table, whereupon the whole company rises, and with the exception of Ernest and a jovial member of the Special Commissioner’s Staff, who get upon the table to lead the chorus, join hands and sing that beautiful old song with all the solemnity of intoxication, after which they drink more champagne, and

jointly and severally swear eternal friendship, especially Ernest and the member of His Excellency's Staff, who shake hands and bless each other, till the warmth of their emotions proves too much for them, and they weep in chorus there upon the table.)

For the rest, Ernest had some vague recollection of helping to drive his newly-found friend home in a wheelbarrow, that would persist in upsetting in every sluit or ditch, especially if it had running water in it; and that was about all he did remember.

In the morning he woke up, or rather first became conscious of pain in his head, in a little double-bedded room attached to the hotel. On the pillow of the bed opposite to him lay Jeremy's battered face.

For a while Ernest could make nothing of all this. Why was Jeremy there?

Where were they? Everything turned round and seemed phantasmagorical; the only real substantial thing was that awful pain in the head. But presently things began to come back to him; and the sight of Jeremy's bruised face recalled the fight; and the fight recalled the dinner; and the dinner brought back a vague recollection of Jeremy's speech, and of something he had said about Eva. What could it have been? Ah, Eva! Perhaps Jeremy knew something about her; perhaps he had brought the letter that had been so long in coming. Oh how his heart went out towards her. But how came Jeremy there in bed before him; how came he to be in South Africa at all?

At that moment his reflections were interrupted by the entry of Mazooku, bearing the coffee which it is the national habit in South Africa to drink early in the morning.

The martial-looking Zulu, who seemed curiously out of place carrying cups of coffee, seeing that his master was awake, saluted him with the customary 'Koos,' lifting one of the cups of coffee to give emphasis to the word, and nearly upsetting it in the effort.

'Mazooku,' said Ernest severely, 'how did we get here?'

The substance of the retainer's explanation was as follows : When the moon was getting low, vanishing indeed, behind the 'horned house' yonder (the Dutch church with pinnacles on it), it occurred to him, waiting on the verandah, that his master must be weary ; and as most had departed from the 'dance' in the 'tin house' (restaurant) evidently made happy by the 'twala' (drink), he entered into the tin house to look for him, and found him overcome by sleep under the table, lying next to the 'Lion-

who - threw - oxen - over - his - shoulder' (*i. e.* Jeremy), so overcome by sleep, indeed, that it was quite impossible to conduct him to the waggon. This being so, he (Mazooku) considered what was his duty under the cumstances, and came to the accurate conclusion that the best thing to do was to put them into the white man's bed, since he knew that his master did not love the floor to lie on. Accordingly, having discovered that this was a room of beds, he and another Zulu entered, but were perplexed to find the beds already occupied by two white men, who had lain down to rest with their clothes on. But under all these circumstances he and the other Zulu, considering that their first thought should be towards their own master, had taken the liberty of lifting up the two white men, who were slumbering profoundly after the 'dance,' by the head and by the heels, and

putting them out in the sweet cool air of the night. Having thus 'made a place,' they then conveyed first Ernest, and having removed his clothes, put him into one bed, and next, in consideration of his undoubted greatness, they ventured to take the 'Lion-who, &c.' himself, and put him in the other. He was a very great man, the 'Lion,' and his art of throwing greater men over his shoulder could only be attributed to witchcraft. He himself (Mazooku) had tried it on that morning with a Basutu, with whom he had had a slight difference of opinion, but the result had not been all that could be desired, inasmuch as the Basutu had kicked him in the stomach, and forced him to drop him.

Ernest laughed as heartily as his headache would allow at this story, and in doing so woke up Jeremy, who at once clapped his hands to *his* head and looked round, where-

upon Mazooku, having saluted the awakened 'lion' with much fervour, and spilt a considerable quantity of hot coffee over him in doing so, took his departure abashed, and at length the two friends were left alone. Thereupon rising from their respective pallets, they took a step in all the glory of their undress uniform into the middle of the little room, and, after the manner of Englishmen, shook hands and called each other 'old fellow.' Then they went back to bed and began to converse.

'I say, old fellow, what on earth brought you out here?'

'Well, you see, I came out to look you up. You did not write any letters, and they began to get anxious about you at home, so I packed up my duds and started. Your uncle stands unlimited tin, so I am travelling like a prince in a waggon of my own. I heard of you down in Maritzburg,

and guessed that I had best make for Pretoria, and here I am and there you are, and I am devilish glad to see you again, old chap. By Jove, what a head I have! But, I say, why didn't you write? Doll half broke her heart about it, and so did your uncle, only he would not say so.'

'I did write. I wrote from Sikukuni's country, but I suppose the letter did not fetch,' answered Ernest, feeling very guilty. 'The fact is, old fellow, I had not the heart to write much, I have been so confoundedly down on my luck ever since that duel business.'

'Ah!' interposed Jeremy, 'that shot was a credit to you. I didn't think you could have done it.'

'A credit! I'll tell you what, it is an awful thing to kill a man like that. I often see his face as he fell, at night in my sleep.'

‘I was merely looking at it as a shot,’ replied Jeremy, innocently; ‘and considered as a shot at twenty paces and under trying circumstances; it *was* a credit to you.’

‘And then, you see, Jeremy, there was another thing, you know—about—about Eva. Well, I wrote to her, and she has never answered my letter, unless,’ with a gleam of hope, ‘you have brought an answer.’

Jeremy shook his aching head.

‘Ah, no such luck. Well, it put me off, and that’s the fact. Since she has chucked me up, I don’t care twopence about anything. I don’t say but what she is right; I dare say that I am not worth sticking to. She can do much better elsewhere;’ and Ernest groaned, and realized that his head was very bad indeed; ‘but there it is. I hadn’t the heart to write any more letters, and I was too proud to write again to her.

Confound her ! let her go. I am not going to grovel to any woman under heaven, no, not even to her ;' and he kicked the bed-clothes viciously.

' I haven't learnt much Zulu yet,' replied Jeremy sententiously ; ' but I know two words—" hamba gachlé "' (go softly).

' Well, what of them ?' said Ernest testily.

' They mean, I am told, " take it easy," or " look before you leap," or " never jump to conclusions," or " don't be in a confounded hurry ;" very fine mottoes, I think.'

' Of course they do ; but what have they got to do with Eva ?'

' Well, just this. I said I had got no letter. I never said—'

' What ?' shouted Ernest.

' Hamba gachlé,' replied Jeremy, the imperturbable, gazing at Ernest out of his

blackened eyes. 'I never said that I had not got a message.'

Ernest sprang clean out of the little truckle bed, shaking with excitement.

'What is it, man?'

'Just this. She told me to tell you that "she loved you dearly."''

Slowly Ernest sat down on the bed again, and, throwing a blanket over his head and shoulders, remarked in a tone befitting a sheeted ghost—

'The devil she did! Why couldn't you say so before?'

Then he got up again and commenced walking, blanket and all, up and down the little room with long strides, and knocking over the water-jug in his excitement.

'Hamba gachlé,' again remarked Jeremy, rising and picking up the water-jug. 'How are we going to get any more water? I'll tell you all about it.'

And he did, including the story of Mr. Plowden's shaking, at which Ernest chuckled fiercely.

'I wish I had been there to *kick* him,' he remarked, parenthetically.

'I did that too, I kicked him hard,' put in Jeremy, at which Ernest chuckled again.

'I can't make it all out,' said Ernest at length, 'but I will go home at once.'

'You can't do that, old fellow. Your respected uncle, Sir Hugh, will have you run in.'

'Ah! I forgot. Well, I will write to her to-day.'

'That's better; and now let's dress. My head is better. By George, though, I am stiff. It is no joke fighting a giant.'

But Ernest answered not a word. He was already, after his quick-brained fashion,

employed in concocting his letter to Eva.

In the course of the morning he drafted it. It, or rather that part of it with which we need concern ourselves, ran thus—

‘Such then, my dearest Eva, was the state of my mind towards you. I thought—God forgive me for the treason—that perhaps you were, as so many women are, a fair-weather lover, and that now that I am in trouble you wished to slip the cable. If that was so I felt that it was not for me to remonstrate. I wrote to you, and I knew that the letter came safely to your hands. You did not answer it, and I could only come to one conclusion. Hence my own silence. And in truth I do not at this moment quite understand *why* you have never written. But Jeremy has brought me your dear message, and with that I am content, for no doubt you have reasons which are satisfactory to yourself,

and if that is so, no doubt, too, they would be equally satisfactory to me if only I knew them. You see, my heart's love, the fact is that I trust and believe in you utterly and entirely. What is right and true, what is loyal and sincere to me and to yourself—those are the things that you will do. Jeremy tells me a rather amusing story about the new clergyman who has come to Kesterwick, and who is, it appears, an aspirant for your hand. Well, Eva, I am sufficiently conceited not to be jealous; although I am in the unlucky position of an absent man, and worse still, an absent man under a cloud. I do not believe that he will cut me out. But on the day that you can put your hand upon your heart, and look me straight in the eyes (ah, Eva, I can see your eyes now), and tell me, on your honour as a lady, that you love this or any other man better than you do me, on that day I shall be ready to resign you to him. But till that day comes—and there is something in my heart which tells me that it is as impossible for it to come as for the mountain-range

I look on as I write to move towards the town and bury it—I am free from jealousy, for I *know* that it is also impossible that you should be faithless to your love.

‘Oh, my sweet, the troth we plighted was not for days, or years, or times—it was for ever. Nothing can dissolve it; Death himself will be powerless against it. With each new and progressive existence it will re-arise as surely as the flowers in spring, only, unlike them, more fragrant and beautiful than before. Sometimes I think that it has already existed through countless ages. Strange thoughts come into a man’s mind out there on the great veldt, riding alone hour after hour, and day after day, through sunlight and through moonlight, till the spirit of nature broods upon him, and he begins to learn the rudiments of truth. Some day I shall tell them all to you. Not that *I* have ever been quite alone, for I can say honestly that you have always been at my side since I left you; there has been no hour of the day or night when you

have not been in my thoughts, and I believe that till death for a period blots out my senses, no such hour will ever come.

‘Day by day, too, my love has grown stronger even in its despair. Day by day it has taken shape and form and colour, and become more and more a living thing, more and more an entity, as distinct as soul and body, and yet as inextricably blended and woven into the substance of each. If ever a woman was beloved, you are that woman, Eva Ceswick ; if ever a man’s life, present and to come, lay in a woman’s hands, my life lies in yours. It is a germ which you can cast away or destroy, or which you can nourish till it bursts into bloom, and bears fruit beautiful beyond imagining. You are my fate, my other part. With you my destiny is intertwined, and you can mould it as you will. There is no height to which I cannot rise by your side, there is no depth to which I may not sink without you.

‘And now, what does all this lead up to? Will you make a sacrifice for me, who am ready to give all my life to you—no, who have already given it. That sacrifice is this. I want you to come out here and marry me; as you know, circumstances prevent me from returning to you. If you will come, I will meet you at the Cape and marry you there. Ah! surely you will come! As for money, I have plenty from home, and can make as much more as we shall want here, so that need be no obstacle. It is long to wait for your answer—three months; but I hope that the faith that will, as the Bible tells us, enable people to move mountains—and my faith in you is as great as that—will also enable me to bear the suspense, and in the end prove its own reward. Oh, how life has changed for me since yesterday!’

Ernest read selected portions of this composition to Mr. Alston and Jeremy. Both

listened in solemn silence, and at the conclusion Jeremy scratched his head and remarked that it was deep enough to 'fetch' any girl, though for his part he did not understand it. Mr. Alston relit his pipe, and for a while said nothing; but to himself he thought that it was a remarkable letter for so young a man to have written, and revealed a curious turn of mind. One remark he did make, however, and that was rather a rude one.

'The girl won't understand what you are driving at, Master Ernest; she will think that you have gone off your head in these savage parts. All you say may or may not be true; on that point I express no opinion—but to write such things to a woman is to throw your pearls before swine. You should ask her about her bonnets, my boy, and tell her what sort of dresses she

should bring out, and that the air is good for the complexion. She would come then.'

Here Ernest fired up.

'You are beastly cynical, Alston, and you should not speak of Miss Ceswick like that to me. Bonnets indeed!'

'All right, my lad, all right. Time will show. Ah, you boys! you go building up your ideals of ivory and gold, and fine linen, only to find them one day turned into the commonest of clay, draped in the dirtiest of rags. Well, well, it is the way of the world; but you take my advice, Ernest, burn that letter, and go in for an Intombi (Kafir girl). It is not too late yet, and there is no mistake about the sort of clay she is made of.'

Here Ernest stamped out of the room in a passion.

‘Too cock-sure, wanted cooling down a little,’ remarked Mr. Alston to Jeremy; ‘should never be cock-sure where a woman is concerned; women are fond of playing dirty tricks, and saying they could not help it. I know them. Come on, let us go and find him, and go for a walk.’

They found Ernest sitting on the box of the waggon, which was outspanned together with Jeremy’s, just outside the town, and looking rather sulky.

‘Come on, Ernest,’ said Mr. Alston, apologetically, ‘I will throw no more mud at your ideal. In the course of the last thirty years I have seen so many fall to pieces of their own accord, that I could not help warning you. But perhaps they make them of better stuff in England than we do in these parts.’

Ernest descended, and soon forgot his

pique. It was but rarely that he bore malice for more than half an hour. As they walked along one of the by - streets they met the young fellow who had acted as second to Jeremy in the big fight of the previous day. He informed them that he had just been to inquire how the giant was. It appeared that he had received an injury to the spine, the effect of Jeremy's 'lift,' from which there was little hope of his recovery. He was not, however, in much pain. This intelligence distressed Jeremy not a little. He had earnestly desired to thrash the giant, but he had had no wish to injure him. With his usual promptitude he announced his intention of going to see his fallen enemy.

'You are likely to meet with a warm reception if you do,' said Mr. Alston.

'I'll risk it. I should like to tell him that I am sorry.'

‘Very good; come along, that is the house.’

The injured man had been carried to the house of a relative just outside the town, a white thatched building, that had been built five-and-thirty years before, when the site of Pretoria was a plain inhabited only by quaggas, eland, and vilderbeeste. In front of the door was a grove of orange-trees, which smelt sweet, and looked golden with hanging fruit.

The house itself was a small white building, with a double swinging door, like those used in stables in this country. The top half of the door was open, and over the lower portion of it leaned a Boer, a rough-looking customer, smoking a huge pipe.

“Dagh, Oom” (good-day, uncle), said Mr. Alston, stretching out his hand.

The other looked at him suspiciously, and then held out a damp paw to each in turn, at the same time opening the door. As Ernest passed the threshold he noticed that the clay flooring was studded with peach-stones well trodden in to its substance to prevent wear and tear of passing feet. The door opened into a fair-sized room, with white-washed walls, called the 'sit-kamé' (sitting-room), and furnished with a settee, a table, and several chairs seated with 'rimpi,' or strips of hide. On the biggest of these chairs sat a woman of large size, the mother of the family. She did not rise on their entry, but without speaking held out a limp hand, which Mr. Alston and the others shook, addressing her affectionately as 'tanta' (aunt). Then they shook hands with six or seven girls and young men, the latter sitting about in an aimless sort of way, the former clearing off the remains

of the family meal, which had consisted of huge bones of boiled fresh beef. So fresh was it, indeed, that on the floor by the side of the table lay the gory head and skin of a newly-killed ox, from which the beef had been cut. Ernest noticing this, wondered at the superhuman strength of stomach that could take its food under such circumstances.

The preliminary ceremony of hand-shaking having been got through, Mr. Alston, who spoke Dutch perfectly, explained the object of their visit. The faces of the Dutchmen darkened as he did so, and the men scowled at Jeremy with hatred not unmingled with terror. When he had done, the oldest man said that he would ask his cousin if he would see them, adding, however, that he was so ill that he did not think it likely. Raising a curtain which served as a door, he passed from

the sitting-room into the bed-room, 'slaap kamé.' Presently he returned, and beckoned to the Englishmen to enter. They passed into a small chamber about ten feet square, which was, after the fashion of these people in cases of any illness, hermetically sealed from air. On a large bed, that blocked up most of the room, and on which it was the usual habit of the master of the house and his wife to sleep *in their clothes*, lay the fallen giant. So much as could be seen of his face was a mass of hideous bruises, and one of his hands, which lay on the bed, was in splints. The chief injury, however, was to his back, and from this he could never expect to recover. By his side sat his little wife, who had on the previous day urged the thrashing of the Hottentot. She glared fiercely at Jeremy, but said nothing. On catching sight of his victor, the giant turned his

face to the wall and asked what he wanted.

‘I have come,’ said Jeremy, Mr. Alston interpreting for him, ‘to say that I am sorry that you are injured so much, that I wanted to beat you, but had no idea that I should hurt you so. I know that the trick of throwing a man as I threw you is very dangerous, and I only used it as a last resource, and because you would have killed me if I had not.’

The Boer muttered something in reply about its being very bitter to be beaten by such a little man.

It was evident to Ernest that the man's pride was utterly broken. He had believed himself the strongest man, white or black, in Africa, and now an English lad had thrown him over his shoulder like a play-thing.

Jeremy next said that he hoped that

he bore no malice, and would shake hands.

The giant hesitated a little, and then stretched out his uninjured hand, which Jeremy took.

‘Englishman,’ he said, ‘you are a wonderful man, and you will grow stronger yet. You have made a baby of me for life, and turned my heart to a baby’s too. Perhaps one day some man will do the same for you. Till then you can never know what I feel. They will give you the Hottentot outside. No, you must take him; you won him in fair fight. He is a good driver, though he is so small. Now go.’

The sight was a painful one, and they were not sorry to get away from it. Outside they found one of the young Boers waiting with the Hottentot boy, whom he insisted on handing over to Jeremy.

Any scruples the latter had about accept-

ing him were overcome by the look of intense satisfaction on the features of the poor wretch himself.

His name was 'Aasvögel' (vulture), and he made Jeremy an excellent and most faithful servant.

CHAPTER X.

A WAY OF ESCAPE.

WHEN Mr. Alston, Jeremy, and Ernest emerged from the back street in which was the house they had visited into one of the principal thoroughfares of Pretoria, they came upon a curious sight. In the middle of the street stood or rather danced a wiry Zulu, dressed in an old military great-coat, and the ordinary native 'moocha,' or scanty kilt, and having a red worsted comforter tied round one arm. He was shouting out something at the top of his voice, and surrounded by a crowd of other natives, who at intervals expressed

their approval of what he was saying in deep, guttural exclamations.

‘What is that lunatic after?’ asked Jeremy.

Mr. Alston listened for a minute, and answered,

‘I know the man well. His name is Goza. He is the fleetest runner in Natal, and can go as fast as a horse; indeed, there are few horses that he cannot tire out. By profession he is a “praiser.” He is now singing the praises of the Special Commissioner, “bongering” they call it. I will translate what he is saying.

“Listen to the foot of the great elephant Somptseu. Feel how the earth shakes beneath the tread of the white t’Chaka, father of the Zulus, foremost among the great white people. Ou! he is here; ou! he is coming. See how the faces of the ‘Amaboona’ (the Boers) turn pale before

him. He will eat them up ; he will swallow them, the huge vulture, who sits still till the ox is dead, who fights the fight of ' sit down.' Oh, he is great, the lion ; where he turns his eye the people melt away, their hearts turn to fat. Where is there one like Somptseu, the man who is not afraid of Death ; who looks at Death and it runs from him ; who has the tongue of honey ; who reigns like the first star at night ; who is beloved and honoured of the great white mother (the Queen) ; who loves his children, the Amazulu, and shelters them under his wide wing ; who lifted Cetywayo out of the dirt, and can put him back in the dirt again ? Abase yourselves, you low people, doctor yourselves with medicine, lest his fierce eyes should burn you up. Oh, hark ! he comes, the father of kings, the Chaka ; oh ! be still ; oh ! be silent, oh ! shake in your knees. He is here, the elephant, the lion, the fierce one,

the patient one, the strong one. See, he deigns to talk to little children ; he teaches them wisdom ; he gives light like the sun—he is the sun—he is t'Somptseu.'

At this juncture a quiet-looking, oldish gentleman, entirely unlike either an elephant, a lion, or a vulture, of medium height, with grey whiskers, a black coat, and a neat black tie fastened in a bow, came round the corner leading a little girl by the hand. As he came the praiser lifted up his right hand, and in the most stentorian tones gave the royal salute, 'Bayète,' which was echoed by all the other natives.

The oldish gentleman, who was none other than the Special Commissioner himself, turned upon his extoller with a look of intense annoyance, and addressed him very sharply in Zulu.

'Be still,' he said. 'Why do you always annoy me with your noise? Be still, I say,

you loud-tongued dog, or I will send you back to Natal. My head aches with your empty words.'

'Oh, elephant! I am silent as the dead. Bayète. Oh, Somptseu! I am quiet, "Bayète."'

'Go. Begone.'

With a final shout of Bayète the Zulu turned and fled down the street with the swiftness of the wind, shouting his praises as he went.

'How do you do, sir?' said Mr. Alston, advancing. 'I was just coming up to call upon you.'

'Ah, Alston, I am delighted to see you. I heard that you were gone on a hunting trip. Given up work and taken to hunting, eh? Well, I should like to do the same. If I could have found you when I came up here, I should have been tempted to ask you to come with us.'

At this point Mr. Alston introduced Ernest and Jeremy. The Special Commissioner shook hands with them.

‘I have heard of you,’ he said to Jeremy; ‘but I must ask you not to fight any more giants here just at present, the tension between Boer and Englishman is too great to allow of its being stretched any more. Do you know, you nearly provoked an outbreak last night with your fighting. I trust that you will not do it again.’

He spoke rather severely, and Jeremy coloured. Presently, however, he made amends by asking them all to dinner.

On the following morning Ernest sent off his letter to Eva. He also wrote to his uncle and to Dorothy, explaining his long silence as best he could. The latter, too, he for the first time took into his confidence about Eva. At a distance he no longer felt the same shyness in speaking to her about

another woman that had always overpowered him when he was by her side.

Now that he had been away from England for a year or so, many things connected with his home life had grown rather faint amidst the daily change and activity of his new life. The rush of fresh impressions had to a great extent overlaid the old ones, and Dorothy, and Mr. Cardus, and all the old Kesterwick existence and surroundings seemed faint and far away. They were indeed rapidly assuming that unreality that in time the wanderer finds *will* gather round his old associations. He feels that they know him no more, very likely he imagines that they have forgotten him, and so they become like the shades of the dead. It is almost a shock to such a one to come back and find, after an absence of many years, that though he has been living his rapid, vigorous life, and storing his time

with many acts good, bad, and indifferent, though he thinks that he has changed so completely, and developed greatly in one direction or another, yet the old spots, the old familiar surroundings, and the old sweet faces have changed hardly one whit. They have been living their quiet English life, in which sensation, incident, and excitement are things unfamiliar, and have varied not at all.

Most people, as a matter of fact, change very little except in so far as they are influenced by the cyclic variations of their life, the passage from youth to maturity, and from maturity to age, and the attendant modes of thought and action befitting each period. But even then the change is superficial rather than real. What the child is, that the middle-aged person and the old man will be also. The reason of this appears to be sufficiently obvious; the unchanging personality that grows not old,

the animating spiritual 'ego,' is there and practically identical, at all periods of life.

The body, the brain, and the subtler intellect may all vary according to the circumstances, mostly physical, of personal existence; but the effect that the passage of a few years, more or less active or stormy, can produce upon a principle so indestructible, so immeasurably ancient, and the inheritor of so far-reaching a destiny as the individual human soul, surely must be small.

Already Ernest began to find it something of a labour to indite epistles to people in England, and yet he had the pen of a ready writer. The links that bound them together were fast breaking loose. Eva, and Eva alone, remained clear and real to the vision of his mind. She was always with him, and to her, at any period of his life, he never found difficulty in writing. For in truth their very natures were inter-

woven, and the rapport between them was not produced merely by the pressure of external circumstances, or by the fact of continual contact and mutual attraction arising from physical causes, such as the natural leaning of youth to youth and beauty to beauty.

These causes no doubt had to do with its production, and perhaps were necessary to its mundane birth, as the battery is necessary to the creation of the electric spark. Thus, had Eva been old instead of a young and lovely girl, the rapport would perhaps never have come into being here. In short, they formed the cable along which the occult communication could pass, but there their function ended. Having once established that communication, and provided a means by which the fusion of spirit could be effected, youth and beauty and the natural attraction of sex to sex had done their part. The great divid-

ing river that rolls so fast and wide between our souls in their human shape had been safely passed, and the two fortunate travellers had been allowed before their time to reap advantages—the measureless advantage of real love, so rare on earth, and at its best so stained by passion ; the divine privilege of suffering for that love's sake that will bring such endless blessings in its train, which will only come to most of us, and then perhaps imperfectly, in a different world to this.

Yes, the bridge might now be broken down, it had served its purpose. Come age, or loss of physical attraction, or separation and icy silence, or the change called death itself, and the souls thus subtly blended can and will and do defy them. For the real life is not here ; here only is the blind beginning of things, maybe the premature beginning.

And so Ernest posted his letters, and then, partly to employ his thoughts, and partly because it was his nature to throw himself into whatever stream of life was flowing past him, he set himself to master the state of political affairs in the country in which he found himself.

This need not be entered into here, further than to say that it was such as might with advantage have employed wiser heads than his, and indeed did employ them. Suffice it to say, that he contrived to make himself of considerable use to the English party, both before and after the annexation of the Transvaal to the dominions of the Crown. Amongst other things he went on several missions in conjunction with Mr. Alston, with a view of ascertaining the real state of feeling among the Boers. He also, together with Jeremy, joined a volunteer corps which was organized for the defence of Pretoria

when it was still a matter of doubt whether or not the contemplated annexation would or would not result in an attack being made upon the town by the Boers. It was a most exciting time, and once or twice Ernest and Jeremy had narrow escapes of being murdered. However, nothing worthy of note happened to them, and at last the long-expected annexation came off successfully, to the intense joy of all the Englishmen in the country, and to the great relief of the vast majority of the Boers.

Now, together with the proclamation by which the Transvaal was annexed to Her Majesty's dominions, was issued another that was to have a considerable bearing upon our hero's fortunes. This was none other than a promise of Her Majesty's gracious pardon to all such as had been resident in the Transvaal for a period of six months previous to the date of annexation,

being former British subjects and offenders against the English criminal law, who would register their name and offence within a given time. The object of this proclamation was to give immunity from prosecution to many individuals formerly deserters from the English army, and other people who had in some way transgressed the laws, but were now occupying respectable positions in their adopted country.

Mr. Alston read this proclamation attentively when it came out in a special number of the *Gazette*. Then, after thinking for a while, he handed it to Ernest.

‘You have read this amnesty proclamation?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ answered Ernest; ‘what of it?’

‘What of it! Ah, the stupidity of youth! Go down, go down on your knees, young man, and render thanks to the Power that inspired Lord Carnarvon with the idea of

annexing the Transvaal. Can't you very well see that it takes your neck out of the halter? Off with you and register your name and offence with the secretary to Government, and you will be clear for ever from any consequences that might ensue from the slight indiscretion of shooting your own first cousin.'

'By Jove, Alston, you don't mean that?'

'Mean it! of course I do. The proclamation does not specify any particular offence to which pardon is to be denied, and you have lived more than six months on Transvaal territory. Off you go.'

And Ernest went like an arrow.

CHAPTER XI.

FOUND WANTING.

ERNEST reached the Government office and registered his name, and in due course received 'Her Majesty's gracious pardon and indemnity from and against all actions, proceedings, and prosecutions at law, having arisen, arising, or to arise, by whomsoever undertaken, &c. &c., conveyed through His Excellency, the Administrator of our said territory of the Transvaal.'

When this precious document was in his pocket, Ernest thought that he now for the first time fully realized what the feelings of a slave unexpectedly manumitted must be. Had it not been for this fortunate accident,

the consequences of that fatal duel must have continually overshadowed him. He would, had he returned to England, have been liable at any period of his life to a prosecution for murder. Indeed, the arm of the law is long, and he lived in continual apprehension of an application for his extradition being made to the authorities of whatever country he was in. But now all this was gone from him, and he felt that he would not be afraid to have words with an attorney-general, or shudder any more at the sight of a policeman.

His first idea on getting his pardon was to return straightway to England, but that silent fate which directs men's lives, driving them whither they would not, and forcing their bare and bleeding feet to stumble along the stony paths of its hidden purpose, came into his mind, and made him see that it would be better to delay a while. In a few weeks

Eva's answer would surely reach him; if he were to go now it was even possible that he might pass her in mid ocean, for in his heart he never doubted but that she would come.

And indeed the very next mail there came a letter from Dorothy, written in answer to that which he had posted on the same day that he had written to Eva. It was only a short letter: the last post that could catch the mail was just going out, and his welcome letter had only just arrived; but she had twenty minutes, and she would send one line. She told him how grateful they were to hear that he was well and safe, and reproached him gently for not writing. Then she thanked him for making her his confidante about Eva Ceswick. She had guessed it long before, she said, and she thought they were both lucky in each other, and hoped and prayed that when the time came they would be as completely happy

as it was possible for people to be. She had never spoken to Eva about him, but she should no longer feel any diffidence in doing so now ; she should go and see her very soon, and plead his cause. Not that it wanted any pleading, however, she was sure of that. Eva looked sad now that he was gone. There had been some talk a while back of Mr. Plowden, the new clergyman, but she supposed that Eva had given him his quietus, as she heard no more of it now ; and so on, till the 'postman is at the door waiting for this letter.'

Little did Ernest guess what it cost poor Dorothy to write her congratulations and wishes of happiness. A man—the nobler animal, remember—could hardly have done it ; only the inferior woman would show such unselfishness.

This letter filled Ernest with a sure and certain hope. Eva, he clearly saw, had not

had time to write by that mail. By the next her answer would come. It can be imagined that he waited for its advent with some anxiety.

Mr. Alston, Ernest, and Jeremy had taken a house in Pretoria, and for the past month or two had been living in it very comfortably. It was a pleasant, one-storied house, with a verandah and a patch of flower-garden in front of it, in which grew a large gardenia bush covered with hundreds of sweet-scented blooms, and many rose trees, that in the divine climate of Pretoria flourish like thistles in our own. Beyond the flowers was a patch of vines, covered at this season of the year with enormous bunches of grapes, extending down to the line of waving willow trees, interspersed with clumps of bamboo that grew along the edge of the sluit and kept the house private from the road. On the other side

of the narrow path which led to the gate was a bed of melons, now rapidly coming to perfection. This garden was Ernest's especial pride and occupation, and just then he was much troubled in his mind about the melons, which were getting scorched by the bright rays of the sun. To obviate this he had designed cunning frameworks of little willow twigs, which he stuck over the melons and covered with dry grass—'parasols' he called them.

One morning—it was a particularly lovely morning—Ernest was standing after breakfast on this path smoking, and directing Mazooku as to the erection of his 'parasols' over his favourite melons. It was not a job at all suited to the capacity of the great Zulu, whose assegai stuck in the ground behind him in the middle of a small bundle of knob-sticks seemed a tool curiously unlike those used by gardeners of other lands.

However, 'needs must when the devil drives,' and there was the brawny fellow on his knees, puffing and blowing and trying to fix the tuft of grass to Ernest's satisfaction.

'Mazooku, you lazy hound,' said the latter at last, 'if you don't put that tuft right in two shakes, by the heaven you will never reach, I'll break your head with your own kerrie.'

'Ow Inkoos,' replied the Zulu sulkily, again trying to prop up the tuft, and muttering to himself meanwhile.

'Do you catch what that fellow of yours is saying?' asked Mr. Alston. 'He is saying that all Englishmen are mad, and that you are the maddest of the mad. He considers that nobody who was not a lunatic would bother his head with those "weeds that stink" (flowers), or these fruits which, even if you succeed in growing them,—and surely

the things are bewitched, or they would grow without "hats" (Ernest's parasols), — 'must lie very cold on the stomach.'

At that moment the particular 'hat' which Mazooku was trying to arrange fell down again, whereupon the Zulu's patience gave out, and cursing it for a witch in the most vigorous language, he emphasized his words by bringing his fist straight down on the melon, smashing it to pieces. Whereupon Ernest made for him, and he vanished swiftly.

Mr. Alston stood by laughing at the scene, and awaited Ernest's return. Presently he came strolling back, not having caught Mazooku. Indeed it would not have greatly mattered if he had, for, as that swarthy gentleman very well knew, great indeed must be the provocation that could induce Ernest to touch a native. It was a thing to which he had an almost unconquer-

able aversion, in the same way that he objected to the word 'nigger' as applied to a people who, whatever their faults may be, are as a rule gentlemen in the truest sense of the word.

As he came strolling down the path towards him, his face a little flushed with the exertion, Mr. Alston thought to himself that Ernest was growing into a very handsome fellow. The tall frame, narrow at the waist and broad at the shoulders, the eloquent dark eyes, which so far surpass the loveliest grey or blue, the silken hair which curled over his head like that on a Grecian statue, the curved lips, the quick intelligence and kindly smile that lit the whole face, all these things helped to make his appearance not so much handsome as charming, and to women captivating to a dangerous extent. His dress too, which consisted of riding breeches, boots and spurs, a white waistcoat

and linen coat, with a very broad soft felt hat looped up at one side, so as to throw the face into alternate light and shadow, helped the general effect considerably. Altogether Ernest was a pretty fellow in those days.

Jeremy was lounging on an easy-chair in the verandah, in company with the boy Roger Alston, and intensely interested in watching a furious battle between two lines of ants, black and red, who had their homes somewhere in the stonework. For a long while the issue of the battle remained doubtful, victory inclining if anything to the side of the thin red line, when suddenly from the entrance to the nest of the black ants there emerged a battalion of giants, great fellows at least six times the size of the others, who fell upon the red ants and routed them, taking many prisoners. Then followed the most curious spectacle, namely,

the deliberate execution of the captive red ants, by having their heads bitten off by the great black soldiers. Jeremy and Roger knew what was coming very well, for these battles were of frequent occurrence, and the casualties among the red ants simply frightful. On this occasion they determined to save the prisoners, which was effected by dipping a match in some of the nicotine at the bottom of a pipe, and placing it in front of the black giants. The ferocious insects would thereupon abandon their captives, and rushing at the strange intruder, hang on like bull-dogs till the poison did its work, and they dropped off senseless, to recover presently and stagger off home, holding their legs to their antennæ and exhibiting every other symptom of frightful headache.

Jeremy was sitting on a chair oiling the matches, and Roger, kneeling on the pavement, was employed in beguiling the giants

into biting them, when suddenly they heard the sound of galloping horses and the rattle of wheels. The lad, lowering his head still more, looked out towards the market square through a gap between the willow stems.

‘Hurrah, Mr. Jones,’ he said, ‘here comes the mail.’

Next minute, amid loud blasts from the bugle, and enveloped in a cloud of dust, the heavy cart, to the sides and seats of which the begrimed, worn-out passengers were clinging like drowning men to straws, came rattling along as fast as the six greys reserved for the last stage could gallop, and vanished towards the post-office.

‘There’s the mail, Ernest,’ holloaed Jeremy ; ‘she will bring the English letters.’

Ernest nodded, turned a little pale, and nervously knocked out his pipe. No wonder ; that mail-cart carried his destiny, and he knew it. Presently he walked across

the square to the Post-office. The letters were not sorted, and he was the first person there. Very soon one of his Excellency's staff came riding down to get the Government house bag. It was the same gentleman with whom he had sung 'Auld lang syne' so enthusiastically on the day of Jeremy's encounter with the giant, and had afterwards been wheeled home in the wheel-barrow.

'Hullo, Kershaw, here we are, "primos inter omnes," "primos primi primores," which is it? Come, Kershaw, you are the last from school—which is it? I don't believe you know, ha! ha! ha! What are you doing down here so soon? Does the "expectant swain await the postman's knock?" Why, my dear fellow, you look pale, you must be in love, or thirsty. So am I,—the latter, not the former. Love, I do abjure thee. "Quis separabit," who will have a split? I

think that the sun can't be far from the line. Shall we, my dear Kershaw, *shall we* take an observation? Ha! ha! ha!'

'No, thank you, I never drink anything between meals.'

'Ah, my boy, a bad habit; give it up before it is too late. Break it off, my dear Kershaw, and always wet your whistle in the strictest moderation, or you will die young. What says the poet,—

"He who drinks strong beer and goes to bed mellow,
Lives as he ought to live, lives as he ought to live,
Lives as he ought to live, and dies a jolly good fellow."

Byron, I think, is it not? ha! ha! ha!'

Just then some others came up, and, somewhat to Ernest's relief, his friend turned the light of his kindly countenance to shine elsewhere and left him to his thoughts.

At last the little shutter of the post-office was thrown up, and Ernest got his own letters, together with those of Mr.

Alston and Jeremy. He turned into the shade of a neighbouring verandah, and rapidly sorted the pile. There was no letter in Eva's handwriting. But there was one in that of her sister Florence. Ernest knew the writing well; there was no mistaking its peculiar upright, powerful-looking characters. This he opened hurriedly. Enclosed in the letter was a note, which was in the writing he had expected to see. He rapidly unfolded it, and as he did so a flash of fear passed through his brain.

‘Why did she write in this way?’

The note could not have been a long one, for in another minute it was lying on the ground, and Ernest, pale-faced, and with catching breath, was clinging to the verandah post with both hands to save himself from falling. In a few seconds he recovered, and picking up the note, walked

quickly across the square towards his house. Half-way across he was overtaken by his friend on the Staff cantering gaily along on a particularly wooden-looking pony, from the sides of which his legs projected widely, and waving in one hand the Colonial Office bag addressed to the administrator of the Government.

‘Hullo, my abstemious friend,’ he holloaed as he pulled up the wooden pony with a jerk that sent each of its stiff legs sprawling in a different direction. ‘Was patience rewarded? Is Chloe over the water kind? If not, take my advice, and don’t trouble your head about her. Quant on a pas ce qu’on aime, the wise man aime ce qu’il a. Kershaw, I have conceived a great affection for you, and I will let you into a secret. Come with me this afternoon, and I will introduce you to two charming specimens of indigenous beauty. Like roses they bloom

upon the Veldt, and waste their sweetness on the desert air. *Matre pulchra, puella pulcherrima*, as Virgil says. I, as befits my years, will attach myself to the mater, for your sweet youth shall be reserved the puella. Ha! ha! ha!' and he brought the despatch bag down with a sounding whack between the ears of the wooden pony, with the result that he was nearly sent flying into the sluit, being landed by a sudden plunge well on to the animal's crupper.

'Woho! Bucephalus, whoho! or your mealies shall be cut off.' Just then he for the first time caught sight of the face of his companion, who was plodding along in silence by his side.

'Hullo! what's up, Kershaw?' he said in an altered tone; 'you don't look well. Nothing wrong, I hope?'

'Nothing, nothing,' answered Ernest quietly; 'that is, I have got some bad

news, that is all. Nothing to speak of, nothing.'

'My dear fellow, I am so sorry, and I have been troubling you with my nonsense. Forgive me. There, you wish to be alone. Good-bye.'

A few seconds later Mr. Alston and Jeremy, from their point of vantage on the verandah, saw Ernest coming with swift strides up the garden path. His face was drawn with pain, and there was a fleck of blood upon his lip. He passed them without a word, and entering the house, slammed the door of his own room. Mr. Alston and Jeremy looked at one another.

'What's up?' said the laconic Jeremy.

Mr. Alston thought a while before he answered, as was his fashion.

'Something gone wrong with "the ideal," I should say,' he said at length, 'that is the way of ideals.'

‘Shall we go and see?’ said Jeremy uneasily.

‘No, give him a minute or two to pull himself together. Lots of time for consolation afterwards.’

Meanwhile Ernest, having got into his room, sat down upon the bed, and again read the note which was inclosed in Florence’s letter. Then he folded it up and put it down, slowly and methodically. Next he opened the other letter, which he had not yet looked at, and read that too. After he had done it he threw himself face downwards on the pillow and thought awhile. Presently he arose, and going to the other side of the room, took down a revolver case which hung to a nail, and drew out the revolver which was loaded. Returning, he again sat down upon the bed and cocked it. So he remained for a minute or two, and then slowly lifted the pistol

towards his head. At that moment he heard footsteps approaching, and with a quick movement threw the weapon under the bed. As he did so Mr. Alston and Jeremy entered.

‘Any letters, Ernest?’ asked the former.

‘Letters! Oh, yes, I beg your pardon; here they are,’ and he took a packet from the pocket of his white coat and handed them to him.

Mr. Alston took them, looking all the while fixedly at Ernest, who avoided his glance.

‘What is the matter, my boy?’ he said kindly at last; ‘nothing wrong, I hope?’

Ernest looked at him blankly.

‘What is it, old chap?’ said Jeremy, seating himself on the bed beside him, and laying his hand on his arm.

Then Ernest broke out into a paroxysm of grief painful to behold. Fortunately for

all concerned it was brief. Had it lasted much longer something must have given way. Suddenly his mood changed, and he grew hard and bitter.

‘Nothing, my dear fellows, nothing,’ he said; ‘that is, only the sequel to a pretty little idyll. You may remember a letter I wrote—to a woman—some months back. There, you both of you know the story. Now you shall hear the answer, or, to be more correct, the answers.

‘That—woman has a sister. Both she and her sister have written to me. My—her sister’s letter is the longest. We will take it first. I think that we may skip the first page, there is nothing particular in it, and I do not wish to—waste your time. Now listen.

“By the way, I have a piece of news for you which will interest you, and which you will I am sure be glad to hear; for of course

you will have by this time got over any little *tendresse* you may have had in that direction. Eva" (that is the woman to whom I wrote, and to whom I thought I was engaged) "is going to be married to a Mr. Plowden, a gentleman who has been acting as *locum tenens* for Mr. Halford." Here Jeremy sprang up and swore a great oath. Ernest motioned him down and went on. "I say I am certain that you will be glad to hear this, because the match is in every respect a satisfactory one, and will, I am sure, bring dear Eva happiness. Mr. Plowden is well off, and, of course, a clergyman, two great guarantees for the success of their matrimonial venture. Eva tells me that she had a letter from you last mail" (the letter I read you, gentlemen), "and asks me to thank you for it. If she can find time she will send you a line shortly. But, as you will understand, she has her hands very full just at present. The wedding is to take place at Kesterwick Church, on the 17th of May" (that is to-morrow, gentlemen), "and if this letter reaches you in time,

I am sure that you will think of us all on that day. It will be very quiet, owing to our dear aunt's death being still so comparatively recent. Indeed the engagement has, in obedience to Mr. Plowden's wishes, for he is very retiring, been kept quite secret, and you are absolutely the first person to whom it has been announced. I hope that you will feel duly flattered, sir. We are very busy about the trousseau, and just now the burning question is, of what colour the dress in which Eva is to go away in after the wedding shall be. Eva and I are all for grey. Mr. Plowden is for olive green, and, as is natural under the circumstances, I expect that he will carry the day. They are together in the drawing-room settling it now. You always admired Eva (rather warmly once; do you remember how cut up you both were when you went away? Alas for the fickleness of human nature!); you should see her now. Her happiness makes her look lovely. But I hear her calling me. No doubt they *have* settled the momentous question. Good-bye.

I am not clever at writing, but I hope that my news will make up for my want of skill.

“Always yours,
“FLORENCE CESWICK.”

‘Now for the enclosure,’ said Ernest.

““DEAR ERNEST,

““I got your letter. Florence will tell you what there is to tell. I am going to be married. Think what you will of me; I cannot help myself. Believe me this has cost me great suffering, but my duty seems clear. I hope that you will forget me, Ernest, as henceforth it will be my duty to forget you. Good-bye, my dear Ernest, oh, good-bye. E.””

‘Humph,’ murmured Mr. Alston beneath his breath, ‘as I thought, clay, and damned bad clay too.’

Slowly Ernest tore the letter into small fragments, threw them down, and stamped

upon them with his foot as though they were a living thing.

'I wish that I had shaken the life out of that devil of a parson,' groaned Jeremy, who was in his way as much affected by the news as his friend.

'Curse you,' said Ernest, turning on him fiercely, 'why didn't you stop where you were and look after her, instead of coming humbugging after me?'

Jeremy only groaned by way of answer. Mr. Alston, as was his way when perplexed, filled his pipe and lit it. Ernest paced swiftly up and down the little room, the white walls of which he had decorated with pictures cut from illustrated papers, Christmas cards, and photographs. Over the head of the bed was a photograph of Eva herself, which he had had framed in some beautiful native wood. He reached it down.

'Look,' he said, 'that is the lady herself.

Handsome, isn't she, and pleasant to look on? Who would have thought that she was such a devil! Tells me to forget her, and talks about "her duty." Women love a little joke.'

He hurled the photograph on to the floor, and treated it as he had treated the letter, grinding it to pieces with his heel.

'They say,' he went on, 'that a man's curses are sometimes heard wherever it is they arrange these pleasant surprises for us. Now you fellows bear witness to what I say, and watch that woman's life. I curse her before God and man. May she lay down her head in sorrow night by night, and year by year! May her—'

'Stop, Ernest,' said Mr. Alston, with a shrug, 'you may be taken at your word, and you wouldn't like that, you know. Besides, it is cowardly to go on cursing at a woman.'

He paused, standing for a moment with his clenched fist still raised above his head, his pale lips quivering with intense excitement, and his dark eyes flashing and blazing like stars.

‘You are right,’ he said, dropping his fist on to the table. ‘It is with the man that I have to deal.’

‘What man?’

‘This Plowden. I fear that I shall disturb his honeymoon.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that I am going to kill him, or he is going to kill me, it does not much matter which.’

‘Why, what quarrel have you with the man? Of course he looked after himself. You could not expect him to consider your interests, could you?’

‘If he had cut me out fairly I should not have a word to say. Every man for him-

self in this pleasant world. But mark my words, this parson and Florence have forced her into this unholy business, and I will have his life in payment. If you don't believe me, ask Jeremy. He saw something of the game before he left.'

'Look here, Kershaw, the man's a parson. He will take shelter behind his cloth, he won't fight. What shall you do then?'

'I shall shoot him,' was the cool reply.

'Ernest, you are mad; it won't do, you shall not go, and that is all about it. You shall not ruin yourself over this woman, who is not fit to black an honest man's shoes.'

'Shall not! shall not! Alston, you use strong language. Who will prevent me?'

'I will prevent you. I am your superior officer, and the corps you belong to is not disbanded. If you try to leave this place you shall be arrested as a deserter. Now don't be a fool, lad; you have killed one

man and got out of the mess. If you kill another, you will not get out of it. Besides, what will the satisfaction be? If you want revenge, be patient. It will come. I have seen something of life; at least I am old enough to be your father, and I know that you think me a cynic because I laugh at your "high falutin" about women. How justly I warned you, you see now. But cynic or no, I believe in the God above us, and I believe too that there is a rough justice in this world. It is in the world principally that people expiate the sins of the world, and if this marriage is such a wicked thing, as you think, it will bring its own trouble with it, without any help from you. Time will avenge you. Everything comes to him who can wait.'

Ernest's eyes glittered coldly as he answered—

'I cannot wait. I am a ruined man

already, all my life is laid waste. I wish to die, but I wish to kill him before I die.'

'So sure as my name is Alston you shall not go.'

'So sure as my name is Kershaw I *will* go.'

For a moment the two men faced one another; it would have been hard to say which looked the most determined. Then Mr. Alston turned and left the room and the house. On the verandah he paused and thought for a moment.

'The boy means business,' he thought to himself. 'He will try and bolt. How can I stop him? Ah, I have it,' and he set off briskly towards Government House, saying aloud as he went, 'I love that lad too well to let him destroy himself over a jilt.'

CHAPTER XII.

ERNEST RUNS AWAY. .

WHEN Alston left the room Ernest sat down on the bed again.

‘I am not going to be domineered over by Alston,’ he said excitedly, ‘he presumes upon his friendship.’

Jeremy came and sat beside him and took hold of his arm.

‘My dear fellow, don’t talk like that. You know he means kindly by you. You are not yourself just yet. By-and-by you will see things in a different light.’

‘Not myself indeed. Would you be yourself, I wonder, if you knew that the woman who had pinned all your soul to her bosom

as though it were a ribbon, was going to marry another man to-morrow ?’

‘Old fellow, you forget, though I can’t talk of it in as pretty words as you can ; I loved her too. I could bear to give her up to you, especially as she didn’t care a brass farthing about me ; but when I think about this other fellow, with his cold grey eye and that mark on his confounded forehead,—ah, Ernest, it makes me sick !’

And they sat on the bed together and groaned in chorus, looking, to tell the truth, rather absurd.

‘I tell you what it is, Jeremy,’ said Ernest, when he had finished groaning at the vision of his successful rival as painted by Jeremy, ‘you are a good fellow, and I am a selfish beast. Here have I been kicking up all this devil’s delight, and you haven’t said a word. You are a more decent chap than I am, Jeremy, by a long chalk. And



I dare say you are as fond of her as I am. No, I don't think you can be that, though.'

'My dear fellow, there is no parallel between our cases. I never expected to marry her. You did, and had every right to do so. Besides, we are differently made. You feel things three times as much as I do.'

Ernest laughed bitterly.

'I don't think that I shall ever feel anything again,' he said. 'My capacities for suffering will be pretty nearly used up. Oh what a sublime fool is the man who gives all his life and heart to one woman! No man would have done it; but what could you expect of a couple of boys like we were. That is why women like boys; it is so easy to take them in—like puppies going to be drowned, in love and faith they lick the hand that will destroy them. It must be amusing—to the destroyers. By Jove, Alston was right about

his ideals. Do you know I am beginning to see all these things in quite a different light. I used to believe in women, Jeremy,—actually I used to believe in them—I thought they were better than we are,’ and he laughed hysterically. ‘Well, we buy our experience; I shan’t make the mistake again.’

‘Come, come, Ernest, don’t go on talking like that. You have got a blow as bad as death, and the only thing to do is to meet it as you would meet death—in silence. You will not go after that fellow, will you? It will only make things worse, you see. You won’t have time to kill him before he marries her, and it really would not be worth while getting hung about it when the mischief is done. There is literally nothing to be done except grin and bear it. We won’t go back to England at all, but right up to the Zambesi, and hunt

elephant; and as things have turned out, if you should get knocked on the head, why, you won't mind it so much, you know.'

Ernest made no answer to this consolatory address, and Jeremy left him alone, thinking that he had convinced him. But the Ernest of midday was a very different man from the Ernest of the morning, directing the erection of 'parasols' over melons. The cruel news that the mail had brought him, and which from force of association caused him for years afterwards to hate the sight of a letter, had, figuratively speaking, destroyed him. He could never recover from it, though he would certainly survive it. Sharp, indeed, must be the grief which kills. But all the bloom and beauty had gone from his life; the gentle faith which he had placed in women was gone (for so narrow-minded are we all,

that we cannot help judging a class by our salient experiences of individuals), and he was from that day forward, for many years, handed over to a long-drawn-out pain, which never quite ceased, though it frequently culminated in paroxysms, and to which death itself would have been almost preferable.

But as yet he did not quite realize all these things; what he did realize was an intense and savage thirst for revenge, so intense indeed, that he felt as though he must put himself in a way to gratify it, or his brain would go. To-morrow, he thought, was to see the final act of his betrayal. To-day was the eve of her marriage, and he as powerless to avert it as a child. Oh, great God! And yet through it all he knew she loved him.

Ernest, like many other pleasant, kindly-tempered men, was, if once stung into

action by the sense of overpowering wrong, extremely dangerous. Ill, indeed, would it have fared with Mr. Plowden if he could have come across him at that moment. And he honestly meant that it should fare ill with that reverend gentleman. So much did he mean it, that before he left his room he wrote his resignation of membership of the volunteer corps to which he belonged, and took it up to the Government-office. Then, remembering that the Potchefstroom post-cart left Pretoria at dawn on the following morning, he made his way to the office, and ascertained that there were no passengers booked to leave by it. But he did not take a place, he was too clever to do that. Leaving the office, he went to the bank, and drew one hundred and fifty pounds in gold. Then he went home again. Here he found a Kaffir messenger dressed in the Government white uni-

form, waiting for him with an official letter.

The letter acknowledged receipt of his resignation, but 'regretted that in the present unsettled state of affairs His Excellency was, in the interest of the public service, unable to dispense with his services.'

Ernest dismissed the messenger, and tore the letter across. If the Government could not dispense with him he would dispense with the Government. His aim was to go to Potchefstroom, and thence to the Diamond Fields. Once there, he could take the post-cart to Cape Town, where he would meet the English mail steamer, and in one month from the present date be once more in England.

That evening he dined with Mr. Alston, Jeremy, and Roger as usual, and no allusion was made to the events of the morning.

About eleven o'clock he went to bed, but not to sleep. The post-cart left at four. At three he rose very quietly, and put a few things into a leather saddle-bag, extracted his revolver from under the bed where he had thrown it when, in the first burst of his agony, he had been interrupted in his contemplated act of self-destruction, and buckled it round his waist. Then he slipped out through the window of his room, crept stealthily down the garden path, and struck out for the Potchefstroom road. But silently and secretly as he went, there went behind him one more silent and secret than he—one to whose race through long generations of tracking foes and wild beasts, silence and secrecy had become an instinct. It was the Hottentot boy, Aasvögel.

The Hottentot followed him in the dim light, never more than fifty paces behind

him, sometimes not more than ten, and yet totally invisible. Now he was behind a bush or a tuft of rank grass ; now he was running down a ditch ; and now again creeping over the open on his belly like a two-legged snake. As soon as Ernest got out of the town, and began to loiter along the Potchefstroom road, the Hottentot halted, uttering to himself a guttural expression of satisfaction. Then watching his opportunity, he turned and ran swiftly back to Pretoria. In ten minutes he was at Ernest's house.

In front of the door were five horses, three with white riders, two being held by Kaffirs. On the verandah, as usual smoking, was Mr. Alston, and with him Jeremy, the latter armed and spurred.

The Hottentot made his report and vanished.

Mr. Alston turned and addressed Jeremy in the tone of one giving an order.

‘Now go,’ he said at last, handing him a paper, and Jeremy went, and mounting one of the led horses, a powerful cream-coloured animal with a snow-white mane and tail, galloped off into the twilight, followed by the three white men.

Meanwhile Ernest walked quietly along the road. Once he paused, thinking that he heard the sound of galloping horses, half a mile or so to the left. It passed, and he went on again. Presently the mist began to lift, and the glorious sun came up; then came a rumble of wheels running along the silent road, and the post-cart with six fresh horses was hard upon him. He halted, and held up his hand to the native driver. The man knew him, and stopped the team at once.

'I am going with you to Potchefstroom, Apollo,' he said.

'All right, sar; plenty of room inside, sar. No passenger this trip, sar, and damn good job too.'

Ernest got up and off they went. He was safe now. There was no telegraph to Potchefstroom, and nothing could catch the post-cart if it had an hour's start.

A mile further on there was a hill, up which the unlovely Apollo walked his horses. At the top of the hill was a clump of mimosa bush, out of which, to the intense astonishment of both Ernest and Apollo, there emerged four mounted men with a led horse. One of these men was Jeremy; it was impossible to mistake his powerful form, sitting on his horse with the grip of a centaur.

They rode up to the post-cart in silence. Jeremy motioned to Apollo to pull up. He

obeyed, and one of the men dismounted and seized the horses' heads.

‘Tricked, by heaven !’ said Ernest.

‘You must come back with me, Ernest,’ said Jeremy quietly. ‘I have a warrant for your arrest as a deserter, signed by the Governor.’

‘And if I refuse ?’

‘Then my orders are to take you back.’

Ernest drew his revolver.

‘This is a trick,’ he said, ‘and I shall not go back.’

‘Then I must take you,’ was the reply ; and Jeremy coolly dismounted.

Ernest's eyes flashed dangerously, and he lifted the pistol.

‘Oh, yes, you can shoot me if you like ; but if you do, the others will take you ;’ and he continued to walk towards him.

Ernest cocked his revolver and pointed it.

‘At your peril,’ he said.

‘So be it,’ said Jeremy, and he walked up to the cart.

Ernest dropped his weapon.

‘It is mean of you, Jeremy,’ he said.
‘You know I can’t fire at you.’

‘Of course you can’t, old fellow. Come, skip out of that ; you are keeping the mail. I have a horse ready for you, a slow one ; you won’t be able to run away on him.’

Ernest obeyed, feeling rather small, and in half-an-hour was back at his own house.

Mr. Alston was waiting for him.

‘Good morning, Ernest,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Went out driving and come back riding, eh?’

Ernest looked at him, and his brown cheek flushed.

‘You have played me a dirty trick,’ he said.

‘Look here, my boy,’ answered Mr. Alston sternly, ‘I am slow at making a

friend ; but when once I take his hand I hold it till one of the two grows cold. I should have been no true friend to you if I had let you go on this fool's errand, this wicked errand. Will you give me your word that you will not attempt to escape, or must I put you under arrest ?'

'I give you my word,' answered Ernest, humbled ; 'and I ask your forgiveness.'

Thus it was that, for the first time in his life, Ernest tried to run away.

That morning Jeremy, missing Ernest, went into his room to see what he was doing. The room was shuttered to keep out the glare of the sun ; but when he got used to the light he discovered Ernest sitting at the table, and staring straight before him with a wild look in his eyes.

'Come in, old fellow, come in,' he called out with bitter jocularly, 'and assist at this happy ceremony. Rather dark, isn't

it? but lovers like the dark. Look!’ he went on, pointing to his watch, which lay upon the table before him, ‘by English time it is now about twenty minutes past eleven. They are being married now, Jeremy, my boy, I can feel it. By heaven! I have only to shut my eyes and I can *see* it.’

‘Come, come, Ernest,’ said Jeremy, ‘don’t go on like that. You are not yourself, man.’

He laughed and answered—

‘I am sure I wish I wasn’t. I tell you I can see it all. I can see Kesterwick church full of people, and before the altar, in her white dress, is Eva; but her face is whiter than her dress, Jeremy, and her eyes are very much afraid. And there is Florence, with her dark smile, and your friend, Mr. Plowden, too, with his cold eyes and the cross upon his forehead. Oh, I assure

you I can see them all. It is a pretty wedding, very. There, it is over now, and I think I will go away before the kissing.'

'Oh, hang it all, Ernest, wake up,' said Jeremy, shaking him by the shoulder. 'You will drive yourself mad if you give your imagination so much rein.'

'Wake up, my boy! I feel more inclined to sleep. Have some grog. Won't you? Well, I will.'

He rose and went to the mantelpiece, on which stood a square bottle of Hollands and a tumbler. Rapidly filling the tumbler with raw spirit, he drank it as fast as the contractions of his throat would allow. He filled it again, and drank that too. Then he fell insensible upon the bed.

It was a strange scene, and in some ways a coarse one, but yet not without a pathos of its own.

‘Ernest,’ said Mr. Alston three weeks later, ‘you are strong enough to travel now ; what do you say to six months or a year among the elephants ? The oxen are in first-rate condition, and we ought to get to our ground in six or seven weeks.’

Ernest, who was lying back in a low cane chair, looking very thin and pale, thought for a moment before he answered—

‘All right, I’m your man ; only let’s get off soon. I am tired of this place, and want something to think about.’

‘You have given up the idea of returning to England ?’

‘Yes, quite.’

‘And what do you say, Jeremy ?’

‘Where Ernest goes, there will I go also. Besides, to shoot an elephant is the one ambition of my life.’

‘Good ! then we will consider that settled.’

We shall want to pick up another eight-bore ; but I know of one a fellow wants to sell, a beauty, by Riley. I will begin to make arrangements at once.'

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. PLOWDEN ASSERTS HIS RIGHTS.

WHEN last we saw Eva she had just become privately engaged to the Reverend James Plowden. But the marriage was not to take place till the following spring, and the following spring was a long way off. Vaguely she hoped something might occur to prevent it, forgetting that as a rule in real life it is only happy things that accidents occur to prevent. Rare indeed is it that the Plowdens of this world are prevented from marrying the Evas ; fate has sufficient to do in thwarting the Ernests. And meanwhile her position was not altogether unendurable, for she had made a bargain with her

lover that the usual amenities of courtship were to be dispensed with. There were to be no embracings or other tender passages, she was not even to be forced to call him James. 'James!' how she detested the name! Thus did the wretched girl try to put off the evil day, much as the ostrich is supposed to hide her head in a bush and indulge in dreams of fancied security. Mr. Plowden did not object, he was too wary a hunter to do so. While his stately prey was there with her head in the thickest of the bush he was sure of her. She would never wake from her foolish dreams till the ripe moment came to deliver the fatal blow, and all would be over. But if, on the contrary, he startled her now, she might take flight more swiftly than he could follow, and leave him alone in the desert.

So when Eva made her little stipulations, he acquiesced in them after only just so

much hesitation as he thought would seem lover-like. 'Life, Eva,' he said sententially, 'is a compromise. I yield to your wishes.' But in his heart he thought that a time would come when she would have to yield to his, and his cold eye gleamed. Eva saw the gleam, and shuddered prophetically.

The Reverend Mr. Plowden did not suffer much distress at the coldness with which he was treated. He knew that his day would come, and was content to wait for it like a wise man. He was not in love with Eva. A nature like his is scarcely capable of any such feeling as that, for instance, which Eva and Ernest bore to each other. True love, crowned with immortality, veils his shining face from such men as Mr. Plowden. He was fascinated by her beauty, that was all. But his cunning was of a superior order, and he was

quite content to wait. So he contrived to extract a letter from Eva, in which she talked of 'our engagement,' and alluded to 'our forthcoming marriage,' and waited.

And thus the time went on all too quickly for Eva. She was quietly miserable, but she was not acutely unhappy. That was yet to come, with other evil things. Christmas came and went, the spring came too, and with the daffodils and violets came Ernest's letter.

Eva was down the first one morning and was engaged in making the tea in the Cottage dining-room, when that modern minister to the decrees of fate the postman brought the letter. She recognized the writing in a moment, and the tea-caddy fell with a crash on to the floor. Seizing it, she tore open the sealed envelope and read it swiftly. Oh, what a wave of love

surged up in her heart as she read! Pressing the senseless paper to her lips, she kissed it again and again.

‘Oh, Ernest!’ she murmured, ‘oh, my love, my darling!’

Just then Florence came down, looking cool and composed, and giving that idea of quiet strength which is the natural attribute of some women.

Eva pushed the letter into her bosom.

‘What is the matter, Eva?’ she said quietly, noting her flushed face, ‘and why have you upset the tea?’

‘Matter!’ she answered, laughing happily—she had not laughed so for months; ‘oh, nothing, I have heard from Ernest, that is all.’

‘Indeed!’ answered her sister, with a troubled smile on her dark face; ‘and what has our runaway to say for himself?’

‘Say ! oh, he has a great deal to say, and I have something to say too. I am going to marry him.’

‘Indeed ! and Mr. Plowden ?’

Eva turned pale.

‘Mr. Plowden ! I have done with Mr. Plowden.’

‘Indeed !’ said Florence again ; ‘really this is quite romantic. But please pick up that tea. Whoever you marry, let us have some breakfast in the mean while. Excuse me for one moment, I have forgotten my handkerchief.’

Eva did as she was bid, and made the tea after a fashion.

Meanwhile Florence went to her room and scribbled a note, enclosed it in an envelope, and rang the bell.

The servant answered.

‘Tell John to take this to Mr. Plowden’s lodgings at once, and if he should be out,

to follow him till he finds him, and deliver it.'

'Yes, miss.'

Ten minutes later Mr. Plowden got the following note :—

'Come here at once. Eva has heard from Ernest Kershaw, and announces her intention of throwing you over and marrying him. Be prepared for a struggle, but do not show that you have heard from me. You must find means to hold your own. Burn this.'

Mr. Plowden whistled as he laid the paper down. Going to his desk he unlocked it, and extracted the letter he had received from Eva, in which she acknowledged her engagement to him, and then seizing his hat, walked swiftly towards the Cottage.

Meanwhile Florence made her way downstairs again, saying to herself as she went, 'An unlucky chance. If I had seen the

letter first I would have burnt it. But we shall win yet. She has not the stamina to stand out against that man.'

As soon as she reached the dining-room, Eva began to say something more about her letter, but her sister stopped her quickly.

'Let me have my breakfast in peace, Eva. We will talk of the letter afterwards. He does not interest me, your Ernest, and it takes away my appetite to talk business at meals.'

Eva ceased and sat silent; breakfast had no charms for her that morning.

Presently there was a knock at the door, and Mr. Plowden entered with a smile of forced gaiety on his face.

'How do you do, Florence!' he said, 'how do you do, dear Eva! You see I have come to see you early this morning. I want a little refreshment to enable me to get through my day's duty. The early suitor

has come to pick up the worm of his affections,' and he laughed at his joke.

Florence shuddered at the simile, and thought to herself that there was a fair chance of the affectionate worm disagreeing with the early suitor.

Eva said nothing. She sat quite still and pale.

'Why, what is the matter with you both? Have you seen a ghost?'

'Not exactly; but I think that Eva has received a message from the dead,' said Florence, with a nervous laugh.

Eva rose. 'I think, Mr. Plowden,' she said, 'that I had better be frank with you at once. I ask you to listen to me for a few moments.'

'Am I not always at your service, dear Eva?'

'I wish,' began Eva, and broke down,—
'I wish,' she went on again, 'to appeal to

your generosity, and to your feelings as a gentleman.'

Florence smiled.

Mr. Plowden bowed with mock humility, and smiled too—a very ugly smile.

'You are aware that before I became engaged to you I had had a previous—affair.'

'With the boy who committed a murder,' put in Mr. Plowden.

'With a gentleman who had the misfortune to kill a man in a duel,' explained Eva.

'The Church and the law call it murder.'

'Excuse me, Mr. Plowden, we are dealing neither with the Church nor the law; we are dealing with the thing as it is called among gentlemen and ladies.'

'Go on,' said Mr. Plowden.

'Well, misunderstandings, which I need not now enter into, arose with reference to

that affair, though, as I told you, I loved the man. To-day I have heard from him, and his letter puts everything straight in my mind, and I see how wrong and unjust has been my behaviour to him, and I know that I love him more than ever.'

'Curse the fellow's impudence,' said the clergyman, furiously; 'if he were here I would give him a bit of my mind.'

Eva's spirit rose, and she turned on him with flashing eyes, looking like a queen in her imperial beauty.

'If he were here, Mr. Plowden, you would not dare to look him in the face. Men like you only take advantage of the absent.'

The clergyman ground his teeth. He felt his furious temper rising, and did not dare to answer, though he was a bold man in face of a woman. He feared lest it should get beyond him. But beneath his

breath he muttered, 'You shall pay for that, my lady.'

'Under these circumstances,' went on Eva, 'I appeal to you as a gentleman to release me from an engagement into which, as you know, I have been drawn more by force of circumstances than by my own wish. Surely it is not necessary for me to say any more.'

Mr. Plowden rose and came and stood quite close to her, so that his face was within a few inches of her eyes.

'Eva,' he said, 'I am not going to be trifled with like this. You have promised to marry me, and I shall keep you to your promise. You laid yourself out to win my affection, the affection of an honest man.'

Again Florence smiled, and Eva made a faint motion of dissent.

'Yes, but you did, you encouraged me. It is very well for you to deny it now,

when it suits your purpose, but you did, and you know it, and your sister there knows it.'

Florence bowed her head in assent.

'And now you wish, in order to gratify an unlawful passion for a shedder of blood,—you wish to throw me over, to trample upon my holiest feelings, and to rob me of the prize which I have won. No, Eva, I will not release you.'

'Surely, surely, Mr. Plowden,' said Eva faintly, for she was a gentle creature, and the man's violence overwhelmed her, 'you will not force me into a marriage which I tell you is repugnant to me? I appeal to your generosity to release me. You can never oblige me to marry you when I tell you that I do not love you, and that my whole heart is given to another man.'

Mr. Plowden saw that his violence was doing its work, and determined to follow it

up. He raised his voice till it was almost a shout.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I will; I will not submit to such wickedness. Love! that will come. I am quite willing to take my chance of it. No, I tell you fairly that I will not let you off; and if you try to avoid fulfilling your engagement to me I will do more; I will proclaim you all over the country as a jilt; I will bring an action for breach of promise of marriage against you—perhaps you did not know that men can do that as well as women—and cover your name with disgrace. Look, I have your written promise of marriage,’ and he produced her letter.

Eva turned to her sister.

‘Florence,’ she said, ‘cannot you say a word to help me? I am overwhelmed.’

‘I wish I could, Eva dear,’ answered her sister kindly; ‘but how can I? What Mr.

Plowden says is just and right. You are engaged to him, and are in honour bound to marry him. Oh, Eva, do not bring trouble and disgrace upon us all by your obstinacy! You owe something to your name as well as to yourself, and something to me too. I am sure that Mr. Plowden will be willing to forget all about this if you will undertake never to allude to it again.'

'Oh, yes, certainly, Miss Florence. I am not revengeful; I only want my rights.'

Eva looked faintly from one to the other; her head sank, and great black rings painted themselves beneath her eyes. The lily was broken at last.

'You are very cruel,' she said slowly; 'but I suppose it must be as you wish. Pray God I may die first, that is all!' and she put her hands to her head and stumbled from the room, leaving the two conspirators facing each other.

‘Come, we got over that capitally,’ said Mr. Plowden, rubbing his hands. ‘There is nothing like taking the high hand with a woman. Ladies must sometimes be taught that a gentleman has rights as well as themselves.’

Florence turned on him with bitter scorn.

‘Gentleman! Mr. Plowden, why is the word so often on your lips? Surely, after the part you have just played, you do not presume to rank yourself among gentlemen? Listen! it suits my purposes that you should marry Eva; and you shall marry her; but I will not stoop to play the hypocrite with a man like you. You talk of yourself as a gentleman, and do not scruple to force an innocent girl into a wicked marriage, and to crush her spirit with your cunning cruelty. A gentleman, forsooth! —a satyr, a devil in disguise.’

‘I am only asserting my rights,’ he

said furiously ; ‘and whatever I have done, you have done more.’

‘Do not try your violence on me, Mr. Plowden ; it will not do. I am not made of the same stuff as your victim. Lower your voice, or leave the house and do not enter it again.’

Mr. Plowden’s heavy under-jaw fell a little ; he was terribly afraid of Florence.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘listen ! I do not choose that you should labour under any mistake. I hold your hand in this business, though to have to do with you in any way is in itself a defilement,’ and she wiped her delicate fingers on a pocket-handkerchief as she said the word, ‘because I have an end of my own to gain. Not a vulgar end like yours, but a revenge, which shall be almost divine or diabolical, call it which you will, in its completeness. Perhaps it is a madness, perhaps it is an inspiration, perhaps it is a

fate. Whatever it is, it animates me body and soul, and I will gratify it, though to do so I have to use a tool like you. I wished to explain this to you. I wished, too, to make it clear to you that I consider you contemptible. I have done both, and I have now the pleasure to wish you good morning.'

Mr. Plowden left the house white with fury, and cursing in a manner remarkable in a clergyman.

'If she wasn't so handsome, hang me if I would not throw the whole thing up,' he said.

Needless to say, he did nothing of the sort, he only kept out of Florence's way.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VIRGIN MARTYR.

DOROTHY, in her note to Ernest that he received by the mail previous to the one that brought the letters which at a single blow laid the hope and promise of his life in the dust, had, it may be remembered, stated her intention of going to see Eva in order to plead Ernest's cause; but what with one thing and another, her visit was considerably delayed. Twice she was on the point of going, and twice something occurred to prevent her. The fact of the matter was, the errand was distasteful, and she was in no hurry to execute it. She loved Ernest herself, and however deep that

love might be trampled down, however fast it might be chained in the dungeons of her secret thoughts, it was still there, a living thing, an immortal thing. She could tread it down and chain it, she could not kill it. Its shade would rise and walk in the upper chambers of her heart, and wring its hands and cry to her, telling what it suffered in those subterranean places, whispering how bitterly it envied the bright and happy life which moved in the free air, and had usurped the love it claimed. It was hard to have to ignore those pleadings, to disregard those cries for pity, and to say that there was no hope, that it must always be chained, till time ate away the chains. It was harder still to have to be one of the actual ministers to the suffering. Still she meant to go. Her duty to Ernest was not to be forsaken because it was a painful duty.

On two or three occasions she met Eva, but got no opportunity of speaking to her. Either her sister Florence was with her, or she was obliged to return immediately. The fact was that, after the scene described in the last chapter, Eva was subjected to the closest espionage. At home Florence watched her as a cat watches a mouse; abroad Mr. Plowden seemed to be constantly hovering on her flank, or if he was not there, then she became aware of the presence of the ancient and contemplative mariner who traded in Dutch cheeses. Mr. Plowden feared lest she should run away, and so cheat him of his prize; Florence, lest she should confide in Dorothy, or possibly Mr. Cardus, and supported by them find the courage to assert herself and defraud her of her revenge. So they watched her every movement.

At last Dorothy made up her mind to

wait no longer for opportunities, but to go and see Eva at her own home. She knew nothing of the Plowden imbroglio; but it did strike her as curious that no one had said anything about Ernest. He had written—it was scarcely likely the letter had miscarried. How was it that Eva had not said anything on the subject? Little did Dorothy guess that, even as these thoughts were passing through her mind, a great vessel was steaming out of Southampton docks, bearing those epistles of final renunciation, which Ernest, very little to his satisfaction, received in due course.

Full of these reflections, Dorothy found herself one lovely spring afternoon knocking at the door of the Cottage. Eva was at home, and she was at once ushered into her presence. She was sitting on a low chair—the same on which Ernest always pictured her with that confounded Skye terrier she

was so fond of kissing,—an open book upon her knee, and looking out at the little garden and the sea beyond. She looked pale and thin, Dorothy thought.

On her visitor's entrance, Eva rose and kissed her.

‘I am so glad to see you,’ she said; ‘I was feeling lonely.’

‘Lonely!’ answered Dorothy in her straightforward way, ‘why, I have been trying to find you alone for the last fortnight, and have never succeeded.’

Eva coloured. ‘One may be lonely with ever so many people round one.’

Then for a minute or so they talked about the weather; so persistently did they discuss it indeed, that the womanly instinct of each told her that the other was fencing.

After all it was Eva who broke the ice first.

‘Have you heard from Ernest lately?’ she said nervously.

‘Yes; I got a note by last mail.’

‘Oh,’ said Eva, clasping her hands involuntarily, ‘what did he say?’

‘Nothing much. But I got a letter by the mail before that in which he said a good deal. Among other things, he said he had written to you. Did you get the letter?’

Eva coloured to her eyes. ‘Yes,’ she whispered.

Dorothy rose, and seated herself again on a footstool by Eva’s feet, and wondered at the trouble in her eyes. How could she be troubled when she had heard from Ernest—‘like that.’

‘What did you answer him, dear?’

Eva covered her face with her hands.

‘Do not talk about it,’ she said; ‘it is too dreadful to me.’

‘What can you mean? He tells me you are engaged to him.’

‘Yes—that is, no. I *was* half engaged. Now I am engaged to Mr. Plowden.’

Dorothy gave a gasp of horrified astonishment.

‘Engaged to that man when you were engaged to Ernest. You must be joking.’

‘Oh, Dorothy, I am not joking, I wish to Heaven I were. I am engaged to him. I am to marry him in less than a month. Oh, pity me, I am wretched.’

‘You mean to tell me,’ said Dorothy rising, ‘that you are engaged to Mr. Plowden when you love Ernest?’

‘Yes, oh yes, I cannot help—’

At that moment the door opened, and Florence entered, attended by Mr. Plowden.

Her keen eyes saw at once that something was wrong, and her intelligence told her what it was. After her bold fashion, she

determined to take the bull by the horns. Unless something were done, with Dorothy at her back, Eva might prove obdurate after all.

Advancing, she shook Dorothy cordially by the hand.

‘I see from your face,’ she said, ‘that you have just heard the good news. Mr. Plowden is so shy that he would not consent to announce it before; but here he is to receive your congratulations.’

Mr. Plowden took the cue, and advanced effusively on Dorothy with ‘outstretched hand. ‘Yes, Miss Jones, I am sure you will congratulate me; and I ought to be congratulated, I am the luckiest—’

Here he broke off. It really was very awkward. His hand remained limply hanging in the air before Dorothy, but not the slightest sign did that dignified little lady show of taking it. On the contrary,

she drew herself up to her full height—which was not very tall—and fixing her steady blue eyes on the clergyman's shifty orbs, deliberately placed her right hand behind her back.

‘I do not shake hands with people who play such tricks,’ she said quietly.

Mr. Plowden's hand fell to his side, and he stepped back. He did not expect such courage in anything so small. Florence however sailed in to the rescue.

‘Really, Dorothy, we do not quite understand.’

‘Oh yes, I think you do, Florence, or if you do not, then I will explain. Eva here was engaged to marry Ernest Kershaw. Eva here has just with her own lips told me that she still loves Ernest, but that she is obliged to marry—that man,’ and she pointed with her little forefinger at Plowden, who recoiled another step. ‘Is not that true, Eva?’

Eva bowed her head, by way of answer. She still sat in the low chair, with her hands over her face.

‘Really, Dorothy, I fail to see what right you have to interfere in this matter,’ said Florence.

‘I have the right of common justice, Florence—the right a friend has to protect the absent. Oh, are you not ashamed of such a wicked plot to wrong an absent man? Is there no way (addressing Mr. Plowden) in which I can appeal to your feelings, to induce you to free this wretched girl you have entrapped?’

‘I only ask my own,’ said Mr. Plowden, sulkily.

‘For shame! for shame! and you a minister of God’s word. And you too, Florence! Oh, now I can read your heart, and see the bad thoughts looking from your eyes!’

Florence for a moment was abashed, and turned her face aside.

‘And you, Eva, how can you become a party to such a shameful thing? You, a good girl, to sell yourself away from dear Ernest to such a man as that;’ and again she pointed contemptuously at Mr. Plowden.

‘Oh don’t, Dorothy, don’t; it is my duty. You don’t understand.’

‘Oh yes, Eva, I do understand. I understand that it is your duty to drown yourself before you do such a thing. I am a woman as well as you, and though I am not beautiful, I have a heart and a conscience, and I understand only too well.’

‘You will be lost if you drown yourself—I mean it is very wicked,’ said Mr. Plowden to Eva, suddenly assuming his clerical character as most likely to be effective. The suggestion alarmed him. He had bargained for a live Eva.

‘Yes, Mr. Plowden,’ went on Dorothy, ‘you are right, it would be wicked, but not so wicked as to marry you. God gave us women our lives, but he put a spirit in our hearts which tells us that we should rather throw them away than suffer ourselves to be degraded. Oh, Eva, tell me that you will not do this shameful thing ;—no, do not whisper to her, Florence.’

‘Dorothy, Dorothy,’ said Eva, rising and wringing her hands, ‘it is all useless. Do not break my heart with your cruel words. I must marry him. I have fallen into the power of people who do not know what mercy is.’

‘Thank you,’ said Florence.

Mr. Plowden scowled darkly.

‘Then I have done ;’ and Dorothy walked towards the door. Before she reached it she paused and turned. ‘One word, and I will trouble you no more. What do

you all expect will come of this wicked marriage ?’

There was no answer. Then Dorothy went.

But her efforts did not stop there. She made her way straight to Mr. Cardus’ office.

‘Oh, Reginald !’ she said, ‘I have such dreadful news for you. There, let me cry a little first and I will tell you.’

And she did, telling him the whole story from beginning to end. It was entirely new to him, and he listened with some astonishment, and with a feeling of something like indignation against Ernest. He had intended that young gentleman to fall in love with Dorothy, and behold he had fallen in love with Eva. Alas for the perversity of youth !

‘Well,’ he said, when she had done, ‘and what do you wish me to do ? It seems that

you have to do with a heartless scheming woman, a clerical cad, and a beautiful fool. One might deal with the schemer and the fool, but no power on earth can soften a cad. At least that is my experience. Besides, I think the whole thing is much better left alone. I should be very sorry to see Ernest married to a woman so worthless as this Eva must be. She is handsome, it is true, and that is about all she is, as far as I can see. Don't distress yourself, my dear, he will get over it, and after he has had his fling out there and lived down that duel business, he will come home, and if he is wise, I know where he will look for consolation.'

Dorothy tossed her head and coloured.

'It is not a question of consolation,' she said, 'it is a question of Ernest's happiness in life.'

'Don't alarm yourself, Dorothy, people's

happiness is not so easily affected. He will forget all about her in a year.'

'I think that men always talk of each other like that, Reginald,' said Dorothy, resting her head upon her hands and looking straight at the old gentleman. 'Each of you likes to think that he has a monopoly of feeling, and that the rest of his kind are as shallow as a milk-pan. And yet it was only last night that you were talking to me about my mother. You told me, you remember, that life had been a worthless thing to you since she was torn from you, which no success had been able to render pleasant. You said more, you said that you hoped that the end was not far off, that you had suffered enough and waited enough, and that though you had not seen her face for five-and-twenty years, you loved her as wildly as you did the day when she first promised to become your wife.'

Mr. Cardus had risen, and was looking through the glass door at the blooming orchids. Dorothy got up, and following him, laid her hand upon his shoulder.

‘Reginald,’ she said, ‘think. Ernest is about to be robbed of his wife, under circumstances curiously like those by which you were robbed of yours. Unless it is prevented, what you have suffered all your life, that he will suffer also. Remember you are of the same blood, and allowing for the difference between your ages, of very much the same temperament too. Think how different life would have been to you if any one had staved off your disaster, and then I am sure you will do all you can to stave off his.’

‘Life would have been non-existent for you,’ he answered, ‘for you would never have been born.’

‘Ah, well,’ she said with a little sigh, ‘I

am sure I should have got on very well without. I could have spared myself.'

Mr. Cardus was a keen man, and could see as far into the human heart as most.

'Girl,' he said, contracting his white eyebrows and suddenly turning round upon her, 'you love Ernest yourself. I have often suspected it, now I am sure you do.'

Dorothy flinched.

'Yes,' she answered, 'I *do* love him; what then?'

'And yet you are advocating my interference to secure his marriage with another woman, a worthless creature who does not know her own mind. You cannot really care about him.'

'Care about him!' and she turned her sweet blue eyes upwards. 'I love him with all my heart and soul and strength. I have always loved him; I always shall

love him. I love him so well that I can do my *duty* to him, Reginald. It is my duty to strain every nerve to prevent this marriage. I had rather that my heart should ache than Ernest's. I implore of you to help me.'

'Dorothy, it has always been my dearest wish that you should marry Ernest. I told him so just before that unhappy duel. I love you both. All the fibres of my heart that are left alive have wound themselves around you. Jeremy I could never care for. Indeed, I fear that I used sometimes to treat the boy harshly. He reminds me so of his father; and do you know, my dear, I sometimes think that on that point I am not quite sane. But because you have asked me to do it, and because you have quoted your dear mother, may peace be with her! I will do what I can. This girl Eva is of age, and I will

write and offer her a home. She need fear no persecution here.'

'You are kind and good, Reginald, and I thank you.'

'The letter shall go by to-night's post. But run away now, I see my friend de Talor coming to speak to me,' and the white eyebrows drew near together in a way that it would have been unpleasant for the great de Talor to behold. 'That business is drawing towards its end.'

'Oh, Reginald,' answered Dorothy, shaking her forefinger at him in her old childish way, 'haven't you given up those ideas yet! They are very wrong.'

'Never mind, Dorothy. I shall give them up soon, when I have squared accounts with de Talor. A year or two more—a stern chase is a long chase, you know—and the thing will be done, and then I shall become a good Christian again.'

The letter was written. It offered Eva a home and protection.

In due course an answer signed by Eva herself, came back. It thanked him for his kindness, and regretted that circumstances and 'her sense of duty' prevented her from accepting the offer.

Then Dorothy felt that she had done all that in her lay, and gave the matter up.

It was about this time that Florence drew another picture. It represented Eva as Andromeda gazing hopelessly in the dim light of a ghastly dawn out across a glassy sea. And far away in the oily depths there was a ripple, and beneath the ripple a form travelling towards the chained maiden. The form had a human head and cold grey eyes, and its features were those of Mr. Plowden.

And so, day by day, Destiny throned in

space shot her flaming shuttle from darkness into darkness, and the time passed on, as the time must pass, till the inevitable end of all things is attained.

Eva existed and suffered, and that was all she did. She scarcely ate, or drank, or slept. But still she lived; she was not brave enough to die; and the chains were rivetted too tight round her tender wrists to let her flee away. Poor nineteenth century Andromeda! No Perseus shall come to save you.

The sun rose and set in his appointed course, the flowers bloomed and died, children were born, and the allotted portion of mankind passed onward to its rest; but no godlike Perseus came flying out of the golden east.

Once more the sun rose. The dragon heaved his head above the quiet waters, and she was lost. By her own act, of her

own folly and weakness, she was undone. Behold her ! the wedding is over. The echoes of the loud mockery of the bells have scarcely died upon the noon-day air, and in her chamber, the chamber of her free and happy maidenhood, the virgin martyr stands alone.

It is done. There lie the sickly-scented flowers, there too the bride's white robe. It is done. Oh that life were done too, that she might once more press her lips to *his* and die !

The door opens, and Florence stands before her, pale, triumphant, awe-inspiring.

‘ I must congratulate you, my dear Eva. You really went through the ceremony very well, only you looked like a statue.’

‘ Florence, why do you come to mock me ?’

‘Mock you, Eva, mock you! I come to wish you joy as Mr. Plowden’s wife. I hope that you will be happy.’

‘Happy! I shall never be happy. I detest him!’

‘You detest him, and you marry him; there must be some mistake.’

‘There is no mistake. Oh, Ernest, my darling!’

Florence smiled.

‘If Ernest is your darling, why did you not marry Ernest?’

‘How could I marry him, when you forced me into this?’

‘Forced you! A free woman of full age cannot be forced. You married Mr. Plowden of your own will. You might have married Ernest Kershaw if you chose. He is in many ways a more desirable match than Mr. Plowden, but you did not choose.’

‘Florence, what do you mean? You always said it was impossible. Oh, is this all some cruel plot of yours?’

‘Impossible! there is nothing impossible to those who have courage. Yes,’ and she turned upon her sister fiercely, ‘it *was* a plot, and you shall know it, you poor weak fool. *I* loved Ernest Kershaw, and *you* robbed me of him, although you promised to leave him alone, and so I have revenged myself upon you. I despise you, I tell you; you are quite contemptible, and yet he could prefer you to me. Well, he has got his reward. You have deserted him when he was absent and in trouble, and you have outraged his love and your own. You have fallen very low indeed, Eva, and will fall lower yet. I know you well. You will sink, till at last you even lose the sense of your own humiliation. Don’t you wonder what Ernest must

think of you now? There is Mr. Plowden calling you—come, it is time for you to be going.'

Eva listened aghast, and then sank up against the wall, sobbing despairingly.

END OF VOL. II.

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